

Summary
Foothills Collaborative Group Meeting
October 23, 2024
Lumpkin County Community Center
Dahlonega, GA

Attendees

FCG Members

Tyler Cross, TNC (FCG Chair)

Conservation Working Group

Jess Riddle, Georgia Forest
Watch

Erick Brown, TNC

Trina Morris, Georgia DNR

Jill Gottesman, The Wilderness
Society

Mincy Moffett, US Fish and
Wildlife Service

Emily Rushton, Georgia DNR

Local Working Group

Marie Dunkle, private citizen

Rob Black, private citizen

***Wildlife/Hunting/Fishing
Working Group***

Chris Jenkins, Backcountry
Hunters and Anglers

Sean Barry, Ruffed Grouse
Society

Recreation Working Group

Cindy Groom, Chattahoochee
Trail Horse Association

Stan Crane, NE GA SORBA

***Economic Development
Working Group***

No members present

Other

Leigh Elkins, UGA Carl Vinson
Institute of Government

Katie Hill, UGA Carl Vinson
Institute of Government

Ruth Stokes, USFS

Brooks Franklin, Local Resident

William Hunter, USFS

Luke Wilson, USFS

John LaCoste, USFS

Sophie Beavin, USFS

Maria Vogel, TNC

Dan Kutschied, Ruffed Grouse
Society & American Woodcock
Society

Thirteen members of the Foothills Collaborative Group (FCG) met in Dahlonega, Georgia, on October 23rd, 2024, to attend the annual Foothills Landscape Project public meeting and a separate FCG meeting. At the public meeting, USFS personnel provided an overview of the Foothills Landscape Project, including successes to date, and presented details on the newest collaborative action for the FCG to consider, the Upper Conasauga Implementation Area Plan.

At the commencement of the FCG meeting, facilitators first requested comments from the group on any old business. The two members of the Local Working Group provided comments. One member stated that he believed two issues exist: (1) that more effort and resources are needed to flesh out the membership of the local working group; and (2) the effectiveness of public outreach. He noted that he and another Local Working Group member had met with Forest Supervisor Judy Toppins about the potential for additional resources for membership outreach efforts.

The Local Working Group also expressed concern regarding access to outside scientific expertise. It was noted that facilitators can obtain outside expertise if a specific need is addressed related to a Collaborative Action. One Local Working Group member expressed interest in outside expertise related to the use of herbicides.

The meeting then turned to new business; specifically, the Upper Conasauga Implementation Area Plan. Comments were provided from each Working Group.

The Wildlife, Fishing, and Hunting Working Group noted that they were supportive of the concept of forest type regeneration and that more regeneration activities are needed. Other comments included a question on whether larger projects would help support timber markets needed to make project activities viable; a desire to improve habitat for specific species such as turkey; an interest in understanding how prescribed fire is utilized with silviculture operations; and an interest in more canebrake restoration. This Working Group also had a few follow-up questions concerning expanding gap restoration, and noted that if the FCG as a whole was interested in learning more Terra Keyser at the Forest Service's Southern Research Station is a recognized leader in this area.

The Conservation Group stated that they were generally in support of the overall objectives of the Plan but had some specific questions about how the individual projects will play out. They had concerns about how nonnative species are controlled and monitored and how treatments are monitored for success, while recognizing that the USFS has very limited capacity. USFS described their approach to nonnatives: they conduct botanical surveys before ground disturbing activities, tracking rare species, nonnatives, and plant communities. USFS noted that dealing with nonnative species is a constant challenge; two methods for dealing with this are the USFS Do Not Plant list (they would never plant nonnative species) and discarding plans to treat stands when they find species such as kudzu, which takes off if given any light. On a question about the shape of proposed openings, USFS noted that the Foothills Landscape Project has a goal of 1% of each watershed in the landscape in permanent openings but from a wildlife management perspective this is still not enough. They explained the significant benefits of these openings to wildlife, including birds, pollinators, and other animals. One Conservation Group member stated that he had very specific questions about individual stands but that he would refrain from asking them now and submit them for the next meeting. The Conservation Group expressed support for more canebrake restoration and asked whether USFS was coordinating with other experts. USFS personnel said that they were working with Roger Cain, a recognized canebrake restoration expert, and the Southern Research Station, and noted

they were training crews to conduct the restoration activities. A member of the Wildlife, Fishing, and Hunting Working Group noted that an NGO out of Franklin, NC, was also doing a lot of this work (Mainspring).

The Local Working Group began with three general questions: (1) whether the desired conditions USFS is aiming for are appropriate, specifically considering impacts from climate change; (2) whether methods are appropriate, particularly the use of certain herbicides; and (3) whether people hired to conduct plan activities are autonomous. A discussion was held concerning the potential for an “after” treatment field trip, and USFS personnel noted they have done such trips in the past (showing specific treatments five, ten, etc., years after). The Local Working Group asked about USFS monitoring, and USFS personnel noted their explicit monitoring requirements related to certain silvicultural treatments and that it might be useful to have a USFS forester come and talk to the group about the monitoring and the process. A Local Working Group member asked about the cycles of prescribed burns, which led to a discussion about having experts from University of Georgia, the Georgia Forestry Commission, or other groups share resources or come and speak to the FCG, in addition to the USFS. It was noted that the Fire Learning Network is having an annual Appalachian meeting in Rabun County, Georgia, in 2025, which may be an opportunity for the FCG to learn more about the role of and techniques for prescribed fire in forest management.

The Recreation Working Group asked about whether the roads that would be daylighted were gated. The group then asked about USFS policies on herbicide use for commercial contracts. USFS personnel explained that there is a specific list of allowable herbicides and when they are used there are USFS personnel on site making sure they are using the right ones. The group then asked a question about the expanding gaps treatment and whether things like greenbriars might just take over the site. USFS personnel said that the hope is that the placement of the treatment will allow oaks to grow and outcompete these other types of vegetation. The Recreation Working Group said that other than these questions they had no major concerns with the Plan.

The meeting concluded with facilitators requesting that the Working Groups submit specific questions they would like answered by the USFS at the next meeting by Friday, November 1st, and to let the facilitators know what types of things they would like to see on a field trip to the Upper Conasauga and whether groups are interested in an “after treatment” field trip.

The meeting adjourned around 2:20pm.