

Eastern Escarpment

****Disclaimer:** The specific descriptions, goals, desired conditions, and objectives only apply to the National Forest System Lands within the Eastern Escarpment Geographic Area. However, nearby communities and surrounding lands are considered and used as context. ******

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Description of area

The steep and craggy landscape of the Eastern Escarpment Geographic Area is highly influenced by the Blue Ridge Escarpment, while also being shaped by Grandfather and Grandmother Mountains. The region contains distinct projecting rocks and cliffs and sudden elevation changes - the most dramatic along the perimeter of Linville Gorge. The rugged and massive rock formations along Jonas Ridge, such as Sitting Bear, Hawksbill, Table Rock, and the Chimneys, shape the forest in this geographic area.

While the ridgetops may be described as craggy and dry, rainwater drains into streams and rivers that merge to form the Johns, Catawba, and Linville Rivers, and eventually flow into Lake James. These waterbodies are highly valued for their scenic beauty, diversity of vegetation and wildlife, unique geology, and recreation opportunities. From its headwaters high on Grandfather Mountain, the Linville River carves the steep-walled Linville Gorge, dropping 2,000 feet in elevation before leveling out in the Catawba River valley at Lake James. This area has been called the "Grand Canyon of the East." In addition, the steep slopes and abrupt elevation changes set the stage for scenic waterfalls including Linville Falls.

The Blue Ridge Parkway and Mountains-to-Sea Trail skirt the north and west boundaries of the geographic area and bring visitors to the eastern part of the Pisgah National Forest on the Grandfather Ranger District. The 139,513 acres of Forest Service land in the geographic area (347,298 acres total) fall in Avery, Burke, Caldwell, McDowell, and Watauga counties. These counties and the communities of Blowing Rock, Boone, Lenoir, Linville, and Morganton rely on the Forest for many ecosystem services that contribute to community health and wellness.

Management areas within the geographic area include:

- Scenic Byway Corridor (Blue Ridge Parkway)
- National Historic Trail Corridor (Overmountain Victory Trail)
- Linville Gorge Wilderness
- Harper Creek and Lost Cove Wilderness Study Areas
- Wilson Creek, a designated Wild and Scenic River, and Linville River, an eligible Wild and Scenic River
- John's Creek Botanical Area and Linville Gorge Geological and Botanical Area
- Inventoried Roadless Areas

Landmarks within the geographic area outside of Forest Service Lands:

- Blue Ridge National Parkway – managed by the National Park Service

Connecting people to the land

The Eastern Escarpment includes ancestral lands of the Catawba and Cherokee American Indian Tribes. In this geographic area, prominent geographical features and waterways are of particular significance to the Tribes.

The Eastern Escarpment is easily-accessible by car, except for the Linville Gorge and Harpers Creek/Lost Cove areas. Historical sites in the area include the Mortimer Civilian Conservation Corps Camp. Driving for pleasure and scenery viewing is often a multigenerational activity in the region, with waterfall trails, overlooks, and picnic areas bringing visitors deeper into the forest. The area has experienced significant improvements in scenic visibility with reduced air pollution in the region. Air quality is likely to continue to improve toward the goal of natural background visibility by 2064. Water-based recreation areas and campgrounds are popular for fishing and wading, and area waterfalls attract those who enjoy viewing scenery. Brown Mountain is another popular destination, including for those who come to see the famed "Brown Mountain Lights."

Rugged backcountry areas provide unique opportunities for visitors seeking to escape from the crowds and experience a remote setting. In the region, some adventure seekers enjoy the Brown Mountain off-highway-vehicle trails, mountain biking along the Wilson Creek corridor, rock climbing in the Linville Gorge or Lost Cove Cliffs, hiking over rocky terrain on the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, roadless settings, or backcountry fishing for trout and smallmouth bass. Wilson Creek and Harper Creek are popular with creek boaters, especially when water flows are high. Bear, deer, and turkey hunting is popular in the geographic area, especially at FSR 106, Dobson Knob, and Roses Creek. The area includes Pisgah game lands where the Forest Service coordinates with the NC Wildlife Resources Commission.

The region is the most lightning prone landscape within the forest, in particular the Linville Mountain area. A greater percentage of the geographic area includes fire adapted vegetation in comparison to all other geographic areas. The urban interface areas from nearby communities surround this geographic area.

Major economic drivers for local communities include manufacturing, health care, construction, agriculture, wood products, and tourism. In addition to providing a wide variety of opportunities for nature-based recreation, National Forest System lands provide support for local economies as it is used by many outfitters and guides, including summer camps, for multiple recreational and educational purposes. Additionally, commercial gathering of forest products such as Galax and shrubbery contributes to local economies.

Enhancing and restoring resiliency

This geographic area supports the largest expanse of shortleaf pine and pine-oak heath habitats of all of the geographic areas, providing for specific opportunities. Shortleaf pine is high priority restoration effort across many of the southeast states, and goals can be met by restoring young forest and developing woodland communities in the geographic area. Pine-oak heath habitats will be restored using prescribed fire. Thinning the dominant dry-mesic oak habitats will create open forest and woodland conditions and restore wildlife habitat.

The Eastern Escarpment supports unique ecozones, which provide habitat for rare plant and animal species. Rare vegetation and ecosystems include Carolina hemlock forest, low elevation rocky summits, upland pools, as well as rocky bar and shore communities. The Eastern Escarpment has higher quality

Carolina hemlock forests than any other geographic area. It is critical to maintain this rare community, currently impacted by hemlock wooly adelgid, within this geographic area to maintain its persistence across the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests as well as throughout its limited range. Linville Gorge Wilderness provides 80 percent of the entire rangewide occupied habitat for mountain golden heather, a federally listed plant.

Clean and abundant water

The geographic area supplies waters to nearby municipalities from sources including Upper, Steels, Roses, and Irish Creeks.

Approximately 1,000 miles of streams and rivers run through the geographic area on National Forest System lands. This geographic area supports the western-most population of the brook floater, a rare native freshwater mussel, in North Carolina.

PRE-DRAFT

Goals

The following goals contribute to identification of management priorities in the Eastern Escarpment Geographic Area. These goals highlight key opportunities and values that will guide Forest Service management and reflect values the Forest Service has heard from the public. These goals are not inclusive of all activities that will occur within the geographic area, and do not represent all the values that are present.

Enhancing and restoring resiliency

- a) Restore and maintain open and woodland forest conditions utilizing a range of management approaches with focus on restoring appropriate fire frequency within pine-oak heath, shortleaf pine, dry oak, and dry-mesic oak ecozones. Emphasize restoration in fire-adapted ecological communities to reduce off-site species, improve wildlife habitat and species diversity, and facilitate hunting opportunities for game species such as white-tailed deer, bear, and ruffed grouse.
- b) Maintain scattered islands of Carolina hemlock forests within geographic area with emphasis at Dobson Knob and in Linville Gorge. Prioritize Carolina hemlock treatment in this geographic area.
- c) Continue to utilize seasonal closure orders on rock faces where peregrine falcons nest to facilitate species recovery.
- d) Maintain and restore mountain golden heather habitat using prescribed burning and wildfire objectives where appropriate.

Providing clean and abundance water

- a) Improve watershed conditions across geographic area. Focus restoration efforts in the Johns River watershed and to mitigate effects in the existing off-highway vehicle use area.
- b) Continue to expand the known, occupied range of the brook floater within the geographic area through increased inventory, population augmentation, and species reintroductions.

Connecting people to the land

- a) Respond to increasing demands for sustainable mountain biking and horseback riding opportunities in the northern and eastern parts of the Geographic Area, as well as access to popular rock climbing areas where those opportunities exist.
- b) Preserve, protect and restore locations that have significant connections to Catawba history and identity. Partner with the Tribe to develop and implement cultural/historical interpretation at appropriate locations.

Places to be managed in consideration of their unique features

Linville Gorge

- a) Maintain scattered islands of Carolina hemlock forests within geographic area with emphasis in Linville Gorge.

- b) Anticipate increased visitation to Linville Gorge Wilderness. Emphasize management actions that sustain, restore, or enhance high quality wilderness recreation experiences, including naturalness and opportunities for solitude.
- c) Emphasize treatment of non-native invasive species in Linville Gorge Wilderness and protect sensitive habitats from heavy trail and climbing use.
- d) Manage hiking and climbing to reduce or eliminate impacts to T&E species such as Heller's Blazing Star, mountain golden heather, and gnome lichens at Linville Gorge.

Opportunities to partner with others

- a) Partner with nearby communities on an integrated response to managing fire in and around urban interface areas.
- b) Partner with wilderness advocacy groups to assist in managing Linville Gorge Wilderness and the geographic area's wilderness study areas and in educating visitors about wilderness ethics and low impact camping techniques.
- c) Partner with diverse recreation groups to assist in maintaining and enhancing the quality of recreation opportunities.