

APPENDIX A

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

INTRODUCTION

Extensive public involvement has been key to the process of revising the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests in Georgia. In general, the approach has centered on continuous involvement of the various segments of the public interested in revision and the overall management of the Forests. The interdisciplinary team (IDT) assigned to develop the revision has strived to maintain meaningful dialogue with groups, agencies and individuals to provide effective and meaningful two-way communication. Various means of communication have been used throughout the multi-year revision process, such as open houses, informational meetings, newsletters, Internet websites, accepting public comments, open working meetings, and news releases.

In accordance with 36 CFR 219.6, owners of lands intermingled with, or dependent for access upon, the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest System lands were notified of forest planning activities along with the general public through notices in the Federal Register, local newspapers, radio/television announcements, and the Forest Plan Monitor newsletter as outlined in the Summary of Public Involvement Activities listed below.

Primary goals for public involvement during LRMP revision have been to:

- Inform and involve the public in the Forest Plan revision process;
- Provide an understanding of the management of resources and the planning process;
- Communicate the desired future conditions established for the Forests; and
- Establish a forum where the public can be heard and have a part in shaping the Forest Plan.

Internally, these goals also apply to informing and involving Forest Service employees in the Forest Plan revision process. This effort ensures understanding and ownership, and provides management direction in the Forest Plan and the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that accurately reflects situations found on the Forests and can be implemented.

The Interdisciplinary Team has strived to attain these goals by:

- Identifying those who have an interest in the management and health of the Forest;
- Developing and utilizing a process to instill a sense of ownership from both internal and external audiences;
- Clearly identifying opportunities for public input;
- Ensuring all communication is understood by potential affected interests by using clear, plain language and avoiding or reducing jargon, acronyms, and/or technical terms; and
- Maintaining flexibility in adjusting communication methods and strategies.

Initial public involvement in the revision process began with the Southern Appalachian Assessment (SAA) conducted from April 1994 to June 1996. The SAA was a collaborative effort among federal and state agencies, universities, special interest groups, and private citizens to produce an ecological assessment of the environment of the Southern Appalachian Mountains eco-region from Virginia to Alabama. The project, spearheaded by the Southern Appalachian Man and the Biosphere cooperative, made no decisions – so was therefore outside the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act for public involvement. However, the agencies decided to conduct open, working meetings and a number of public meetings to engage the public in an informal, ongoing basis. The public involvement framework of the SAA provided a foundation and influence for the revision of the Land and Resource Management Plan of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests.

The following list conveys the key opportunities presented for public information sharing, participation and involvement:

- “ECO 21” Newsletter – a Forest newsletter developed to inform people of accomplishments, mileposts or upcoming events. The twenty newsletters were issued quarterly beginning in April 1995 continuing through August 2002, mailed hardcopy to the Forests’ planning mailing list (more than 3000 addresses) and posted on the Internet web site. The newsletters helped keep the public and employees updated and informed. They also provided information on the revision process, public participation opportunities, resource management, issues identification, and alternative formulation and evaluation.
- Open houses were held throughout the Forests to inform and involve the public and receive their input. They were designed for the public to visit one-on-one with the Forest Service specialists conducting the Plan revision.
- Information meetings were held to scope for issues, to ensure comments had been incorporated correctly, and to present Plan Alternatives in a public forum to receive feedback and critique.
- Collaboration was emphasized to bring government agencies and resource interest organizations into the process to identify issues and establish an open forum for discussion of alternatives and management direction.

- Employee briefings were held at key points in the planning process to provide Forest employees with information, and to collect information pertinent to developing Alternatives and Plan direction for future implementation.
- Information has been made available on the Chattahoochee-Oconee Internet website, and on the planning page of the Southern Region's website. The web site was operational in early 1996, and has been used to post Plan revision documents, maps, newsletters, and to solicit comments and input.
- Coordination with Southern Appalachian Forests and the Regional Office staffs during revision has been an emphasis to provide a consistent approach to revision. Through meetings, conference calls and work sessions held throughout the process, the five SA Forests have strived to provide the public a consistent message including terminology, meeting dates, documents, direction and analysis.

KEY STEPS USED TO IDENTIFY ISSUES, CONCERNS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Public participation and involvement was solicited throughout the revision planning process with emphasis at the following steps:

STEP 1: IDENTIFYING THE NEED TO CHANGE THE FOREST PLAN – ANALYSIS OF THE MANAGEMENT SITUATION

The Forest IDT prepared an Analysis of the Management Situation (AMS) in 1995 to analyze the current management situation in terms of progress towards meeting the goals and objectives of the Forest Plan signed in 1986. This document evaluated all Forest resource areas and programs in an effort to assess the “need for change” for the resource management of the Forest. The AMS is prepared approximately one year prior to the formal beginning point of the Plan Revision.

The Forests held open houses in February 1995 to receive comment on old growth, roadless areas, and areas suitable for timber harvest. Follow-up open houses were also held in June 1995 to provide information on the SAA inventories and gather public input on the SAA process.

During preparation of the AMS, the IDT hosted listening sessions in August 1995 with Forest employees and the Management Team to identify need for change items. A series of ten public open house meetings was hosted by the IDT in October 1995 to provide basic information on the planning process and initiate a process to receive comments on the need for change.

Monthly open working meetings, hosted by the Forest IDT, were held at the Supervisor's office in Gainesville, beginning in November 1995. The public was invited to participate in the scheduled meetings to learn more about the process. A

total of 38 open IDT working meetings were scheduled and held from October 1995 through August 2002.

STEP 2: PUBLIC SCOPING

In August 1996, a Notice of Intent (NOI) to revise Forest Plans in five National Forests in the Southern Appalachians was published in the *Federal Register*. The NOI announced that the Forest Service planned to prepare an environmental impact statement in conjunction with the revision of the Land and Resource Management Plans for the five Forests. A proposed action, a preliminary list of alternatives, a list of possible issues and an overview of the planning process to be used by the Forests were discussed in the NOI. Comments were solicited from the public during an official 120-day period. The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests received over 30,000 individual comments from 3,000 plus respondents. All comments were logged into a database and analyzed to develop the list of issues for Plan revision.

Public meetings and listening sessions were held through the months of September and October 1996 to provide information on the planning process, scoping and preliminary issues. Meetings were held in Gainesville, Dalton, Clayton, Blue Ridge, Blairsville, Eatonton, and Atlanta to be available to the interested publics. Individuals attending were provided the opportunity to be added to the mailing list. In addition, the Forest IDT was available, upon request, to present the proposed action and answer questions on the process to organizations and interest groups.

STEP 3: ISSUE DEVELOPMENT

In February 1997 the Forest IDT participated in the Common Ground Roundtable, co-sponsored by the Georgia Conservancy and the Southern Timber Purchasers Council. The main objective of the facilitated session was to discuss forest management issues and reach a common ground understanding of the future of the Forest.

In March 1997 the Forest IDT reviewed the comments from the public scoping process and agreed to four local issues for the Plan Revision.

The Regional Office in Atlanta developed issue statements in July 1997 common to the five National Forests participating in the revision process, and identified twelve common issues for the five. These issues were described in the ECO 21 newsletter and the monthly open IDT meeting. Four additional Forest specific issues were also identified for the Chattahoochee-Oconee for a total of sixteen issues.

STEP 4: ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Initially the five Southern Appalachian Forests developed four themes for resource management and direction. Along with the description of the current management situation (or current 1985 Forest Plan), these themes became the foundations for alternatives to be analyzed. Public meetings were held in three locations in April

1998 to present the narrative emphasis of the four themes and explain how the 12 issues would be addressed.

The four themes (A, B, C and D) were then converted to alternatives A, B, C, and D, and four additional alternatives (E, F, G and H) were added based on public input and issues. The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests IDT conducted public meetings in September-October 1998 to display each of the alternatives with maps and draft management prescriptions. Eleven public meetings were hosted to present the highlights of each mapped alternative and request comments and suggestions for changes. Meetings were held concurrently with each Ranger District on the Forest to request input and recommended changes to mapping from Forest employees.

The 1998 open house meetings were held in a facilitated format to provide all participants the opportunity to provide input and get questions answered. The Forest IDT used interpretive concepts, trigger questions, photos displaying the different alternatives, and prepared response forms to make the meetings more meaningful to the public giving of their time to be involved.

In October 1999 the IDT hosted three two-day meetings to get agreement on how a new Alternative I, also called the "rolling alternative," should address the issues. Alternative I was the beginning point for developing the preferred alternative, a tool to use in reaching common ground among resource interests. Five public meetings were held in November-December 1999 to provide an overview of the mapping of the rolling alternative and the possible direction to be implemented for the 40 plus management prescriptions allocated on the Forests under Alternative I.

Concurrent with the public meetings on the rolling alternative, the Forest IDT hosted a public meeting in December 1999 to solicit input on a National roadless area policy initiated by the Washington Office of the Forest Service. Follow-up meetings on the roadless area policy were held in May and June of 2000.

STEP 5 – DEVELOPING CONSISTENCY AMONG THE SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN FORESTS

During 1999-2002, the five Forests involved in the revision process worked to ensure consistency in their products and scientific direction. On the Chattahoochee-Oconee, the IDT also worked with the Forest Leadership Team and District employees to ensure that the final Forest Plan can be implemented on the Forests. Meetings were also held with cooperating and regulatory agencies during this time and with other groups upon request. Open working IDT meetings continued through 2000 into 2002 on a scheduled basis. These meetings afforded the public opportunities to be informed on the content of the rolling alternative, management prescriptions, forest plan standards, maps and other related information in the revision documents.

Draft copies of the 72 plus management prescriptions and descriptions of the alternatives were posted on a regular basis on the planning page of the Southern

Region website. Maps of the alternatives were also available on the website for public review and comment.

The Forest IDT also held several meetings with the IDT from the Sumter National Forest, to develop consistent management direction for the shared Chattooga River watershed; and with the Cherokee National Forest IDT to address management of the shared Conasauga River watershed. Informal discussions and coordination was also completed with the Planning staff of the Nantahala National Forest to ensure consistent direction along the border, even though the Nantahala was not in revision.

In August 2002, the IDT hosted an open house in Gainesville to display the changes in the rolling alternative since the last public meetings. At that meeting, the team made available the draft plan maps for each alternative (A to I) and other pertinent data related to the effects analysis.

OTHER PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Throughout the planning process (1996 to present), members of the Forest Plan Revision IDT have served as team members of Southern Appalachian Forest teams assigned to develop planning direction, analysis methodologies and reports for the 5 Forests. These teams held scheduled working meetings open to the public, generally in Knoxville, TN, Atlanta, GA, Asheville, NC or Chattanooga, TN. The various teams include:

- Southern Appalachian Planners (SAP)
- Fisheries, Wildlife, Range, Botany & Ecology Team (FWRBE)
- Riparian Team
- Recreation Team
- Silviculturists
- Plan Analysts
- Ecological Classification

Throughout the planning process, the IDT members have also provided presentations or information meetings on request to a number of organizations and groups such as:

- Trout Unlimited (several chapters)
- Chattooga River Watershed Coalition
- Georgia ForestWatch
- Georgia Conservancy
- Oconee Chapter – Society of American Foresters
- Appalachian Trail Club – Georgia Chapter
- Friends of the Mountains
- Southern Off-Road Bicycling Association
- USDA Forest Service – Southern Research Station – Athens
- University of Georgia School of Forest Resources

- Ruffed Grouse Society – Georgia Chapter
- International Mountain Bicycling Association
- Georgia Department of Natural Resources – Wildlife Resources Division

PUBLIC REVIEW AND COMMENT ON THE DRAFT EIS AND FOREST PLAN

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and the Forest Land Management Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests were officially released in March, 2003. Distribution of the documents began the official 90-day period of public review and comment. A summary document, along with a compact disc containing the complete drafts of the EIS, Plan, appendices, and maps showing land allocations, was distributed to the full mailing list of the Forests (approximately 3,500 sets). The summary, Plan, EIS, and maps were also posted on the Forest Service's Southern Region website. Complete sets of the printed documents were made available at most public libraries in the 27 counties in Georgia with National Forest System lands and at the Ranger District offices of the Forests. Complete printed sets were also distributed to legislators and Federal and State agencies with particular interest and as required by law.

The 90-day comment period required by NEPA began with the publication of the Notice of Availability in the Federal Register on April 4, 2003. The comment period, which was concurrent for all five of the Southern Appalachian Forests in revision, ended on July 3, 2003. All comments were submitted to the Forest Service's Content Analysis Team in Salt Lake City, Utah, a group specifically tasked and trained to sort and analyze high volumes of public comments, and provide that analysis to the organization seeking comments.

During April and May of 2003, the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests held five public meetings (Young Harris, Dalton, Gainesville, Eatonton and Duluth) to provide overview information on the draft Plan and EIS, and to answer questions. Forest Service personnel with expertise in various resource areas staffed each meeting, and breakout sessions were used to allow attendees a chance to ask specific questions of specialists in their area of particular interest. Maps were available for review; summary documents with the CDs were available for distribution; and the process for submitting comments was explained. Three of the meetings were announced in the cover letter that was mailed with the Summary/CD package, and two meetings were added after that mailing. All meetings were publicized in newspapers and on local radio stations.

The Content Analysis Team returned comments to the Forests in summary form, and the original, individual comments were also forwarded to each Forest. Many significant and minor changes were made to the Plan and EIS in response to public and internal comments. The official record of the responses to the public comments is reported in detail in Appendix G to the Final EIS. The Content Analysis Team

created a mailing list of all individuals or organizations that submitted comments, and that list was merged with the Forests' list to create an updated mailing list for distribution of the final documents.