

CHAPTER 1

PURPOSE, NEED, AND SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

INTRODUCTION

This Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) describes the analysis of several alternatives considered in proposing revisions of the *Land and Resource Management Plan for Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests* (Forest Plan) and discloses the environmental effects of these alternatives. The companion document to this EIS is the revised Forest Plan. The EIS is guided by the implementing regulations of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) found in the Council of Environmental Quality Regulations, *Title 40, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 1500*. The Forest Plan document provides a detailed presentation of the preferred alternative as identified in the EIS.

The purpose of a Forest Plan is to provide an integrated framework for analyzing and approving future site-specific projects and programs. The revised Forest Plan will guide all natural resource management activities on the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests (the Forests) to meet the objectives of Federal law, regulations, and policy. The proposed action will also affect a wide range of socioeconomic factors, as they relate to natural resources. The regulations implementing the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) instruct Regional Foresters to make periodic revisions to forest plans and to provide the basis for any revision (*Code of Federal Regulations 36 CFR 219.10(g)*).

This document will be used in future environmental analyses through “tiering,” which means environmental analyses and documents prepared for projects arising from the Forest Plan will refer to the Final Environmental Impact Statement and Forest Plan. Tiering avoids repetitive review of the same issues, and is appropriate when the sequence of statements or analyses is: from a program, plan, or policy to a site-specific statement or analysis (*40 CFR 1508.28*).

REASONS FOR THE REVISION

This section describes the need to change the Forest Plan and presents the basis for the proposed changes within the context of the regulatory requirements. The Forest

and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (RPA), as amended by the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA), requires that each national forest be managed under a forest plan. Regulations require that forest plans be revised on a 10- to 15-year cycle, or sooner if conditions or the areas covered by the plan change significantly. The existing Forest Plan for the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests was approved September 25, 1985. As of 2002, there were 21 amendments to the existing Forest Plan. Comprehensive revision of the Forest Plan is now needed to satisfy regulation requirements and to address new information about the forest and its uses.

In addition to the time requirement, numerous issues and changing conditions have driven the need to revise the Forest Plan. This chapter provides detail on the particular issues and changing conditions that necessitate revision. The issues and conditions to be taken into account have been identified largely through:

- The Southern Appalachian Assessment, the study area for which included much of the Chattahoochee National Forest
- The Analysis of the Management Situation, a comprehensive study by the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests to determine the current condition of the Forest resources, and supply and demand factors
- Extensive public input solicited throughout the planning process beginning at the earliest stages
- New and/or changed laws and policies.

The commonality of conditions and values makes it appropriate that all of the Southern Appalachian Forest Plan revisions be done simultaneously.

SUMMARY OF THE ANALYSIS OF THE MANAGEMENT SITUATION

In addition to the issues raised by the public, the “Analysis of the Management Situation for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests” determined the need for revision based on the results of monitoring, other policy and direction since 1986, the mandated 5-year review ((36 CFR 219.10(g)), the current condition of the resources, and supply and demand factors. This analysis also determined the ability of the planning area covered by the Forest Plan to supply goods and services in response to society’s demands and provided a basis for formulating a broad range of reasonable alternatives.

A summary of the major findings that reflect the need for revision of the Plan follows:

- Since 1986, several changes in policy and social trends affected management of the national forests. Increasing interest in environmental issues and public land management led to greater public involvement in decision-making.
- In June 1992, the Chief issued a policy of ecosystem management of the national forests with direction for reduction in clearcutting on the national

forests. The Forest Plan needed to be revised to incorporate fully these decisions and policies.

- The Forest Plan needed to incorporate the recommended 1990 Resources Planning Act Program.
- The Forest Plan needed to provide goals and objectives for ecological restoration and maintenance.
- A broader range of silvicultural systems and harvest methods needed to be evaluated and standards incorporated into the Forest Plan.
- Many of the management area allocations were too broad to provide meaningful direction for an ecological approach to management.
- The Forest Plan needed to include the ecological classifications.
- The monitoring and evaluation strategy of the Forest Plan needed to be revised to answer whether we are achieving the goals, objectives, and desired future conditions of the Forest Plan rather than emphasizing outputs and activities.
- Demand for recreation is expected to increase in the future. Activities expected to increase the most are fishing, visiting historical sites, and recreational vehicle camping. Demand for hunting is increasing at a slower rate than other recreational activities. The demand in terms of number of recreation visitor-days on the forests is greatest in driving for pleasure, camping, picnicking, fishing, hunting, and waterfront activities. The national forests supply large areas of semi-primitive and rural landscapes suited for dispersed recreation activities such as hiking, horseback riding, hunting, motorized use, nature study, and trail bicycle riding. More direction for the mix and types of developed recreation facilities was needed. More specific direction was needed on the proper mix, amount, and compatibility of uses of the trail system as well as more specifics on the off-highway vehicle policy.
- Wilderness use on the forests is popular. Recreation use is one element in the demand for wilderness. Other wilderness values include ecological, spiritual, and psychological values. Recommendations were needed for disposition of wilderness study areas (roadless areas).
- Recommendations and evaluations were needed for eligible National Wild and Scenic Rivers System streams.
- The Forest Plan needed to be revised to include the new Scenery Management System.
- The Forest Plan needed to be revised to give better direction on the goals and objectives of the fisheries program and standards for fisheries management.
- Determination of habitat management areas and population objectives for the Red-cockaded Woodpeckers (RCW) was needed to conform to Regional direction.

- Objectives for range use and forage improvement needed to be revised.
- The allowable sale quantity of softwood and hardwood timber needed to be recalculated to account for the effects of restorative ecosystem management and management for the RCW. More direction was needed for managing land exchanges and acquisitions.
- The Forest Plan needed to be revised to include new management direction for road construction, reconstruction, maintenance, and closure.
- Prescribed burning and wildland fire use purposes and objective levels for all seasons needed to be revised to restore the role of fire as a natural ecological process.
- Air quality information needed to be brought up to date.
- Future demand for special land uses is expected to increase. The Forest Plan needed to include guidance on the appropriate uses of the Forests to guide the permitting of special uses on the forests.
- Demand for recreational gold collecting in and around national forest land is localized, but a standard ecological policy needed to be addressed and established.

EXPANDED KNOWLEDGE BASE

Our ability to understand and quantify conditions and changes in the forests has increased a great deal since 1985. The Forest Service now has a geographic information system (GIS), which greatly enhances the plan revision process. The inter-disciplinary team preparing the revised Plan and the EIS made extensive use of the new GIS database to assess wildlife habitat and biological diversity, develop an inventory of roadless areas, and evaluate the Forest's vegetation types.

In the Southern Appalachian area, a Southern Appalachian Assessment (SAA) has been completed. Also completed was the Chattooga Ecosystem Management Demonstration Project (Chattooga Project), which was an effort to consolidate and integrate ecological information for the Chattooga River watershed. Located at the junction of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia this watershed includes portions of three national forests. Information from these analyses, which cross state boundaries and involve multiple national forests, was used along with the individual national forests' updated Analysis of the Management Situation (AMS) reports, to determine what decisions should be reanalyzed or changed in Forest Plan revision.

The main objective of the AMS has been to do the analysis leading to a proposal to change forest management direction. A key part of that analysis, for significant portions of each of the forests, is the SAA. The SAA is culminated in a final summary report and four technical reports, which are now available to the public. The reports were prepared by the USDA Forest Service (the Southern Region of the National Forest System and the Southern Forest Experiment Station) in cooperation with the

other Federal and State agencies that are members of SAMAB (Southern Appalachian Man and the Biosphere) Cooperative. The SAA includes National Forest System lands and private lands in the George Washington/Jefferson, Nantahala-Pisgah, Cherokee, and Chattahoochee National Forests and parts of the Sumter and Talladega National Forests. It also involves the National Park Service lands in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Shenandoah National Park, and Blue Ridge Parkway.

The SAA facilitates an interagency ecological approach to management in the Southern Appalachian area by collecting and analyzing broad-scale biological, physical, and socioeconomic data to facilitate better, more ecologically-based, forest-level resource analysis and management decisions. The SAA is organized around four themes: (1) Terrestrial Resources (including Forest Health and Plant and Animal Resources); (2) Aquatic Resources; (3) Atmospheric Resources; and (4) Social, Cultural, and Economic Resources (including the Human Dimension, Roadless Areas and Wilderness, Recreation, and Timber Supply and Demand). As the national forests in the Southern Appalachians were each conducting an AMS, they were also providing information for the larger-scale analysis in the Southern Appalachian Assessment. The SAA supports the revision of the Forest Plans by describing how the lands, resources, people, and management of the national forests interrelate within the larger context of the Southern Appalachian area. The SAA, however, is not a “decision document,” and it did not involve the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. As broad-scale issues were identified at the sub-regional level (Southern Appalachian Mountain area) in the SAA, the individual national forest’s role in resolving these broad-scale issues becomes a part of the “need for change” at the forest level. Public involvement has been important throughout both of these processes. Continuing public involvement leading to formulation of alternatives for the Forest Plan revision was conducted through the “scoping” period that followed the issuance of the Notice of Intent in August, 1996.

Although the existing Forest Plan does not preclude the use of ecosystem management to accomplish its goals and objectives, the long-term objectives of that Plan did not fully consider some of the ecosystem functions, processes, and biological diversity concerns recognized today. Continuing biological inventories have identified some species not previously known to be on the forests. Some processes, such as fire, are better understood in the context of past and present species composition and the role fire played to shape the fauna and flora on the landscape. New information and techniques are now available that improve the ability to do landscape-level analysis in assessing the effects on the environment. The current Forest Plan permits the restoration of ecosystem health, but is weak or lacking in identifying where this is needed and the tools needed to accomplish it.

Additional knowledge about the Forest’s ecosystems requires a shift in resource inventory needs. These needs were not fully addressed in the 1985 Forest Plan, and the significant cost of additional resource inventories, monitoring, and analysis is not accounted for there.

The combination of the revised Forest Plan and the Southern Appalachian Assessment defines an ecological approach to meet the intent of the Forest Service ecosystem management policy by:

- considering geographic scales both larger and smaller than the Chattahoochee-Oconee planning areas,
- using the National Hierarchical Framework of Ecological Units (Forest Service, 1993) to organize and interpret data for terrestrial ecological classification,
- considering data and actions across jurisdictional boundaries,
- coordinating with other agencies, research, and the private sector, and
- adapting management by focusing on the need for change from the previous Forest Plan.

OTHER CHANGED CONDITIONS

Concerns have mounted regarding urbanization near the Forests, the management of roadless areas, and other issues. In addition, increasing levels and new types of recreational use on the Chattahoochee-Oconee NFs call for different management approaches to address issues of public access, conflicts between uses and users, and protection of the environment. Finally, newly created or changed laws and policies affect forest plan content and forest management. Examples include the 1987 Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Amendments of 1990, and the Chattahoochee National Forest Protection Act of 1991. Based on the time since the last major revision and the various changed conditions and uses on the Forests, the Forest Supervisor determined that a revised plan was required to satisfy regulatory requirements and to address new information about the Forests and their uses.

Incorporating the types of changes described above into the Forest Plan entails making changes throughout the document, from the goals and objectives through the standards, to the monitoring requirements. A change this broad needs a Forest Plan Revision. The significant issues, defined later in this chapter and discussed in detail in chapter 2, largely capture the areas in which management direction is expected to change.

DECISIONS MADE IN FOREST PLANS

National Forest System resource allocation and management decisions are made in two stages. The first stage is the Forest Plan, which allocates lands and resources to various uses or conditions by establishing management areas and management prescriptions for the land and resources within the plan area. The second stage is approval of project decisions.

Forest plans do not compel the agency to undertake any site-specific projects; rather, they establish overall goals, objectives, and desired resource conditions that the individual national forest strives to meet. Forest plans also establish limitations on what actions may be authorized, and what conditions must be met as project decisions are made.

The primary decisions made in a Forest Plan include:

1. establishment of the forestwide multiple-use goals and objectives (36 CFR 219.11(b)).
2. establishment of forestwide management requirements (36 CFR 219.13 to 219.27).
3. establishment of multiple-use prescriptions and associated standards for each management area (36 CFR 219.11(c)).
4. Identification of lands within management areas that are not suited for timber production (16 U.S.C. 1604(k) and 36 CFRE 219.14).
5. establishment of allowable sale quantity for timber within a time frame specified in the plan (36 CFR 219.16).
6. establishment of monitoring and evaluation requirements (36 CFR 219.11(d)).
7. recommendation of roadless areas as potential wilderness areas (36 CFR 219.17).
8. where applicable, designation of lands administratively available for oil and gas leasing and authorization of the Bureau of Land Management to offer specific lands for leasing (36 CFR 228.102 (d) and (e)).

The authorization of site-specific activities within a plan area occurs through project decision-making, which is the implementation stage of forest planning. Project decision making must comply with NEPA procedures, and site-specific projects must be consistent with the Forest Plan.

SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENTS

The following Environmental Impact Statements contain environmental analyses that are not repeated in this EIS, but provide supporting documentation for some of the Forest Plan decisions.

- *Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Gypsy Moth Management in the United States: A Cooperative Approach* (USDA Forest Service and APHIS, Washington, DC, November 1995)
- *Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Management of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker and its Habitat on National Forests in the Southern Region* (USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, June 1995)
- *Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Suppression of the Southern Pine Beetle* (USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, February, 1987)
- *Final Environmental Impact Statement for Vegetation Management in the Appalachian Mountains* (USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, July, 1989)
- *Final Environmental Impact Statement for Vegetation Management in the Coastal Plain/Piedmont* (USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, January, 1989)

FOREST PROFILE

DESCRIPTION OF PLANNING AREA

The planning area for this plan consists of the Chattahoochee National Forest and the Oconee National Forest. The Chattahoochee NF is located across the northern portion of the state with lands in 18 counties. The Oconee NF is located in the Central/Piedmont portion with lands in 8 counties. The lands within each forest lie within either a proclamation boundary or a purchase unit. A proclamation boundary is established by Executive Order and provides that existing National Forest System lands, or lands to be acquired for national forest purposes, shall be a part of the National Forest System. The Secretary of Agriculture may establish a purchase unit to create a new boundary or to adjust or expand an existing boundary, within which federally- acquired lands will become a part of the National Forest System.

There are two other areas administered by the USDA Forest Service in the State of Georgia. The Hitchiti Experimental Forest consists of approximately 4,735 acres administered as part of the Oconee NF. The Forest Service administers a 2-acre Experiment Station office site in Athens. Both of these areas are managed under the direction of the Research Branch of the Forest Service.

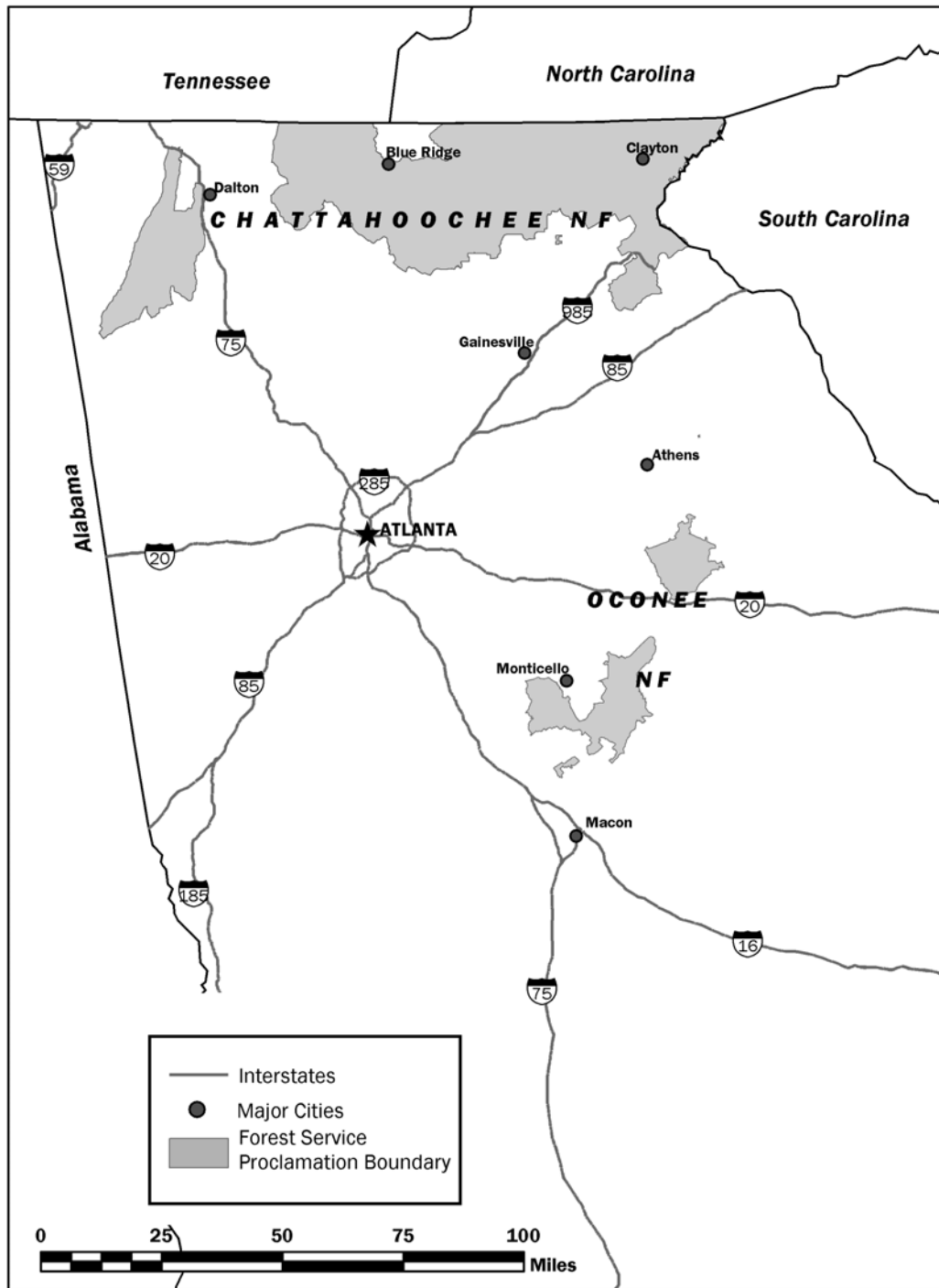


Figure 1- 1. Vicinity Map for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FORESTS

The Chattahoochee NF comprises approximately 750,000 acres in north Georgia. It is generally characterized by Appalachian Oak Forest typical of the southernmost reaches of the Appalachian Mountains. The westernmost portion of the forest is somewhat different. It is located in the Ridge and Valley ecological section, and consists of an oak-hickory-pine forest type. The southeastern corner of the forest is also distinctive. Upper Piedmont topography and an oak-hickory-pine forest type characterize this area. Features of notable significance on the Chattahoochee NF include Brasstown Bald (the highest point in Georgia), the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the majority of cold-water trout fisheries, and over 150,000 acres of Congressionally designated areas. Chattahoochee NF lands are contained in the headwaters of four major river basins that begin in Georgia: the Tennessee, Chattahoochee, Coosa, and Savannah Rivers. Water from each of these basins provides essential domestic and industrial water supplies for numerous cities and towns downstream of National Forest lands. The Coosa and Chattahoochee basins are part of on-going tri-state negotiations on allocation of surface waters.

The lands on the Chattahoochee NF are usually found in large blocks on the mountainsides and ridges, with private lands in the valleys. There are occasional, usually small, private parcels that are partly or completely surrounded by national forest land. Similarly, there are forest parcels that are isolated from the larger blocks and are partially or completely surrounded by private lands.

The Oconee NF consists of approximately 115,000 acres south of Athens and east of Atlanta, Georgia. The lands are generally in large blocks, but with a generous interspersing of private lands. The private lands are sometimes in fairly large blocks of farmland or lands owned or managed by large timber companies. This forest occurs as two separate sections, a northern section near Madison and Greensboro; and a southern section near Monticello and Eatonton. Interstate Highway 20 creates a east-west boundary between the two sections of National Forest. The Oconee is a Piedmont forest with predominantly pine vegetation on the uplands and wide hardwood bottomlands. Features of notable significance on the Oconee NF include Murder Creek Research Natural Area (RNA), Scull Shoals Historic Area, Scull Shoals Archeological Area, and a threatened and endangered species—the red-cockaded woodpecker. Two major river basins flow through the Oconee National Forest, the Ocmulgee and the Oconee. These two basins include reservoirs managed for hydroelectric power production, recreation and water supply. Much of the private lands surrounding the lakes have experienced increasing development for residential and recreational uses. The two basins flow together south of the Forest to form the Altamaha River which flows to the Atlantic Ocean between Savannah and Brunswick, GA.

Acreage figures for the Chattahoochee-Oconee NFs (based on 2000 land records) are shown in Figure 1- 2. The Chattahoochee NF contains 749,689 acres, which represents 47.3 percent of the 1,584,405 acres contained within its proclamation/purchase boundary. The Oconee NF contains 115,353 acres, which is

41.1 percent of the 280,849 acres within its proclamation/purchase boundary. The Oconee NF figures include the Ocmulgee Purchase Unit, which was established on the Oconee in 1995 to include 10,000 acres west of the Ocmulgee River. To date, 250 acres in Monroe County have been acquired within that purchase unit. The Ocmulgee was an important acquisition because of the relative rareness of undeveloped river frontage through this central part of Georgia.

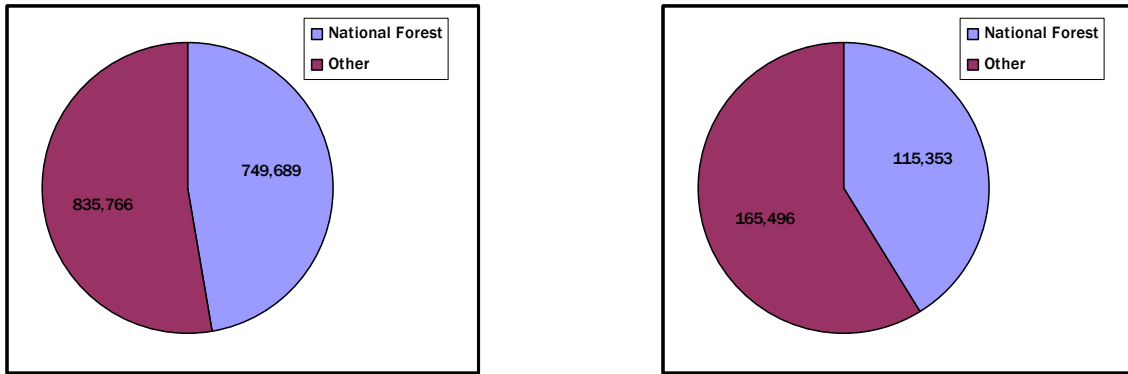


Figure 1- 2. Acres within Chattahoochee-Oconee NF Proclamation/Purchase Boundaries

Table 1- 1 shows the National Forest ownership in each county. Within the Chattahoochee NF, Rabun County has the largest percentage of its land base in national forest ownership with 62.6 percent. On the Oconee NF, Putnam County has the largest with 17.0 percent.

Table 1- 1. National Forest Ownership by County - 1995

National Forest/ County	Total Acres* in County	National Forest Acres**	% National Forest Acres
Chattahoochee NF			
Banks	149,568	650	4.3
Catoosa	103,808	6	0
Chattooga	200,832	19,390	9.7
Dawson	135,040	6,760	5.0
Fannin	246,912	106,104	43
Floyd	328,512	6,620	2.7
Gilmer	273,088	54,718	20.0
Gordon	227,328	8,077	3.6
Habersham	178,048	39,874	22.4
Lumpkin	182,080	56,942	31.3
Murray	220,416	51,360	23.3
Rabun	237,504	148,640	62.6
Stephens	114,752	23,304	20.3
Towns	106,560	57,538	54.0
Union	206,528	97,866	47.4
Walker	285,632	18,844	6.6
White	154,624	41,276	26.7
Whitfield	185,600	11,720	6.3
TOTAL		749,689	
Oconee NF			
Greene	248,576	26,659	10.7
Jasper	237,120	30,313	12.8
Jones	252,032	16,461	6.5
Monroe	253,248	250	0.1
Morgan	223,808	308	0.1
Oconee	118,912	157	0.1
Oglethorpe	282,304	3,762	1.3
Putnam	220,480	37,443	17.0
TOTAL		115,353	

*Based on U.S. Bureau of the Census - 1990.

**Data from Land Area Report (LAR), USDA Forest Service, R8.

The Forest transportation system currently includes 1,545 miles of roads under Forest Service jurisdiction that provide access to and through the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests. The transportation network is completed by approximately 400 miles of roads under county and state jurisdiction that provide access to the Forests' roads.

Table 1- 2 displays the total miles of National Forest System roads on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests by operational maintenance level i.e., the level of maintenance a road receives.

Table 1- 2. National Forest System Roads by Operational Maintenance Level

	Operational System Miles		Total
	Chattahoochee	Oconee	
Level 1	114	2	116
Level 2	712	77	789
Level 3	312	142	454
Level 4	162	2	164
Level 5	19	3	22
Total	1,319	226	1545

Source: INFRA Database

Operational maintenance levels:

- Level 1 Road closed for more than one year
- Level 2 High clearance vehicles
- Level 3 Passenger vehicles, the surface is not smooth
- Level 4 Passenger vehicles, the surface smooth
- Level 5 Passenger vehicles –dust free, possibly paved

SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN FOREST COORDINATION

Information from the Southern Appalachian Assessment crossed State boundaries and involved multiple national forests. It has been key to the coordination of planning among the National Forests of the southern Appalachian region. On February 24, 1995, a Notice of Intent was placed in the *Federal Register* (Vol. 60, No. 37) that identified the relationships between the SAA and the Forest Plan revisions of the National Forests in Alabama, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, Cherokee National Forest, Jefferson National Forest, and Sumter National Forest. Significant issues that crossed National Forest boundaries were developed in common for all of the Southern Appalachian forests. Each Forest also developed issues unique to them. In response to the 12 common issues, common alternatives and management prescriptions were developed (see Chapters 2 and 3).

A region-level management team with representation from each Forest provided direction and oversight throughout the planning process. Interdisciplinary teams (IDTs) from all the Forests in the Southern Appalachian region have consulted frequently throughout the extended planning process with a view toward achieving consistency in alternative development and management prescriptions where appropriate, always considering the conditions and needs in the individual Forests.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Extensive public involvement is key to the process of revising the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests in Georgia. Providing for public comment helps identify what people want from the national forests in the form of goods, services, and environmental conditions. In general, the Forest's approach has centered on ongoing involvement of the various segments of the public interested in revision and the overall management of the Forest. The interdisciplinary team responsible for developing the revision has strived to support ongoing dialogue with groups, agencies and individuals to provide two-way rather than one-way communication. Various means of communication have been used such as open houses and information meetings, newsletters, Internet websites, open working meetings and news releases.

Primary goals for public involvement during the Plan 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.

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.

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

- Identifying the need to change the Forest Plan through the Analysis of the Management Situation
- Public scoping to inform interested parties of the planning process and the preliminary lists of alternatives and issues, as well as to solicit public comment. (More than 30,000 comments were received from 3,000 plus respondents at the scoping phase. All comments were logged into a database and analyzed to develop the list of issues for Plan revision.)

- Development of issues common to the five Southern Appalachian region national forests, and issues specific to each forest involved in the coordinated plan revision process
- Development and evaluation of alternative strategies for resource management and direction
- Coordination among the Southern Regional Office and the five forests involved in the planning process to ensure appropriate consistency in their products and scientific direction.

The draft Forest Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests were released in March, 2003. 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. During April and May of 2003, the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests held five public meetings to provide overview information on the draft Plan and EIS, and to answer questions. 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. Appendix A to this Environmental Impact Statement provides more detailed information relating to public involvement during the plan revision process

SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

As a preliminary to the development of the plan, many issues relating to the management of the Forests were identified through public input and Forest Service studies. As the planning process progressed, issues were selected and prioritized to be specifically addressed in the Forest Plan and the EIS. The issues that are addressed in detail in the Plan and the EIS are described in the following section.

The Southern Appalachian Assessment provided key information concerning those portions of the Forests that are within the SAA area. The SAA teams compiled existing regionwide information on resource status and trends, conditions, and impacts of various land management activities and resource uses that apply to portions of each of the national forests.

In addition to the issues emerging from the public and the SAA, the need for change was identified through an Analysis of the Management Situation. This analysis also provides a basis for formulating a broad range of reasonable alternatives.

The significant issues described below address public comments expressed in letters and appeals, directives of the Chief of the Forest Service, and concerns of Forest Service professionals. Southern Appalachian forest issues are common to the following national forests: National Forests in Alabama, Chattahoochee National Forest in Georgia, Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee, Jefferson National Forest in Virginia, and Sumter National Forest in South Carolina. As a Piedmont forest, the

Oconee National Forest, has quite different characteristics. However, it shares the issues identified for the Southern Appalachian forests. These issues were used to define several alternative management strategies, which are described and analyzed in detail in the EIS.

Issues Common to the Southern Appalachian Forests

The issues and planning questions are summarized in the following questions, which were used to develop alternatives for the Forest Plan revision process.

Issue 1 - Terrestrial Plants And Animals And Their Associated Habitats

Issue Statement: How should the national forests retain or restore a diverse mix of terrestrial plant and animal habitat conditions, while meeting public demands for a variety of wildlife values and uses?

Issue 2 - T & E And Sensitive/Locally Rare Species

Issue Statement: What levels of management are needed to protect and recover the populations of federally listed Threatened, Endangered and Proposed species? What level of management is needed for Forest Service sensitive and locally rare species?

Issue 3 - Old Growth

Issue Statement: The issue surrounding old growth has several facets, including: (1) How much old growth is desired, (2) Where should old growth occur, and (3) How should old growth be managed?

Issue 4 - Riparian Area Management, Water Quality And Aquatic Habitats

Issue Statement: What are the desired riparian ecosystem conditions within national forests, and how will they be identified, maintained and/or restored? What management direction is needed to help ensure that the hydrologic conditions needed for the beneficial uses of water yielded by and flowing through National Forest System lands are attained? What management is needed for the maintenance, enhancement, or restoration of aquatic habitats?

Issue 5 - Wood Products

Issue Statement: The issue surrounding the sustained yield production of wood products from national forests has several facets, including: What are the appropriate objectives for wood product management? Where should removal of wood products occur, given that this production is part of a set of multiple use objectives, and considering cost effectiveness? What should be the level of outputs of wood products? What management activities associated with the production of wood product are appropriate?

Issue 6 - Aesthetics/Scenery Management

Issue Statement: The issue surrounding the management of the visual quality has two facets: What are the appropriate landscape character goals for the national forests? What should be the scenic integrity objectives for the national forests?

Issue 7 - Recreation Opportunities/Experiences

Issue Statement: How should the increasing demand for recreational opportunities and experiences be addressed on the national forests while protecting forest resources? This includes considering a full range of opportunities for developed and dispersed recreation activities (including such things as nature study, hunting and fishing activities, and trail uses).

Issue 8 - Roadless Areas/Wilderness Management

Issue Statement: Should any of the roadless areas on National Forest System lands be recommended for wilderness designation? For any roadless areas not recommended for wilderness, how should they be managed? How should areas recommended for wilderness designation be managed? How should the patterns and intensity of use, fire, and insects and disease be managed in the existing wilderness areas?

Issue 9 - Forest Health

Issue Statement: What conditions are needed to maintain forest capacity to function in a sustainable manner as expected or desired? Of particular concern are the impacts of non-native and native pest species, and the presence of ecological conditions with a higher level of insect and disease susceptibility.

Issue 10 - Special Areas And Rare Communities

Issue Statement: What special areas should be designated, and how should they be managed? How should rare communities, such as those identified in the Southern Appalachian Assessment, be managed?

Issue 11 - Wild And Scenic Rivers

Issue Statement: Which rivers are suitable for designation into the National Wild and Scenic River System and how should rivers that are eligible, but not suitable be managed?

Issue 12 - Access/Road Management (Travel Management)

Issue Statement: How do we balance the rights of citizens to access their national forests with our responsibilities to protect and manage the soil and water resources, wildlife populations and habitat, aesthetics, forest health, and desired vegetative conditions?

Issues Specific to the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests

In addition to the issues affecting the Southern Appalachian region as a whole, the following local issues were determined for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests:

Issue 13 – Chattooga River Watershed

Issue Statement: How can the national forests manage the Chattooga River watershed for desired social and ecological benefits while protecting the outstanding values of the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River corridor?

Issue 14 – Red-Cockaded Woodpecker

Issue Statement: (1) What portions of the Oconee National Forest should be designated as a habitat management area (HMA) for the Red Cockaded Woodpecker (RCW)? (2) Should it be a Forest Plan goal to acquire lands in order for the Oconee to be a recovery area for the RCW or maintain current land ownership and be a support area for the RCW?

Issue 15 – Recreational Gold Collecting

Issue Statement: How will recreational gold collecting be authorized on the Chattahoochee National Forest to meet public demand and minimize impacts to other resources?

Issue 16 – Special Uses

Issue Statement: How should the special uses of communication sites, utility corridors, and recreation residences be authorized on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests?

PLANNING PROCESS

Forest planning occurs within the overall framework provided by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the agency regulations for their implementation. National, regional, and individual forest planning forms an integrated three-level process. In this structure, regional planning is the principal channel for conveying information between forest and national levels.

Planning actions required by the NFMA and used in this planning process are:

1. Identification of issues, concerns, and opportunities
2. Development of planning criteria
3. Inventory of resources and data collection
4. Analysis of the management situation
5. Formulation of alternatives
6. Estimation of effects of alternatives
7. Evaluation of alternatives
8. Recommendation of preferred alternative
9. Approval and implementation
10. Monitoring and evaluation

The results of planning steps 1- 8 are described in this document, the EIS. Refer to Appendix A “Summary of Public Involvement” and Appendix B “Description of the Analysis Process” for more detail on the results of these steps.

PLANNING PROCESS RECORDS

The Forest’s Interdisciplinary Team is responsible for developing the revised Forest Plan. Efforts were made to provide detailed explanations of each step of the revision in the form of process (or planning) records. This FEIS contains summaries of the process records and includes references to the parent records. Process records are on file in the Forest Supervisor’s Office.

To review these records, contact:

Forest Supervisor’s Office
1755 Cleveland Highway
Gainesville, Georgia, 30501
Telephone: 770/297-3000
Fax: 770/297-3025

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