



United States Department of Agriculture

# Foothills Landscape Project

*Providing for a shared vision to address complex conservation challenges  
on the Chattahoochee National Forest in Georgia*



**“The right work in the right places  
for the right reasons”**



Forest  
Service

Southern  
Region

December 2019

## IT'S ABOUT HABITAT

### Managing for biodiversity in the Foothills

A diversity of plants and animals requires diversity in habitats. Because of past practices, the Foothills Landscape is now mostly an even-aged, closed canopy forest that doesn't provide benefits for all the different species that need a variety of natural habitats. Open light environments, like woodlands, provide forage, seed, pollen and nesting cover to specific species over a long part of the year, while mature forests provide habitat to a suite of species that may use tree cavities or canopy habitat.

Sunlit and shaded, young and mature, dry and wet, warm and cool, high and low...this project will add more variety to the Landscape. Science tells us that if we want to support biodiversity, we must provide diverse, connected, resilient and sustainable habitats. That's what this project is designed to do in the Foothills.

- Designate and conserve an additional 5,050 acres of Old Growth Forest across the Landscape
- Create small canopy gaps across 5% of the Landscape to let in patches of sunlight
- Restore woodland habitat with a mosaic of sunlight and shade across 5% of the Landscape
- Restore rare mountain bogs and canebrakes wherever we can across the Landscape
- Create young forest full of cover and forage for wildlife across 7% of the Landscape
- Expand meadow-like open spaces for wildlife across 1% of the Landscape



No Treatment Planned

Conserve Old Growth

Maintain Oak

Restore Southern Yellow Pine or Oak at Off-site Pine Plantations  
Maintain Southern Yellow Pine

Restore Southern Yellow Pine

Improve Health of Off-site Pine Plantations

Create Canopy Gaps

Restore Woodland Habitat

FOOTHILLS LANDSCAPE = 157,625 acres

5,000+ acres

An additional 5,050 acres of Old Growth Forest would be designated and conserved across the Landscape – comprising a minimum of 5% of every single watershed.

40% of the project is aimed specifically at helping advance Southern yellow pines and Oaks – especially Oaks!

Up to **50,000 acres** would be added to controlled fire treatment areas to restore and maintain healthy forest conditions across the Landscape. An additional 2,000 acres of hazardous fuel reduction would occur in Wildland Urban Interface areas where communities are at high risk for wildfires,



Open understory maintained by fire allows regeneration and promotes biodiversity

Overgrown understory where natural fire regimes have been suppressed limits diversity



Native Southern yellow pine species in the Foothills Landscape include Shortleaf pine (woodland pictured), Pitch pine and Table mountain pine. Southern yellow pine forests contain extraordinary cultural, ecological, and economic value by providing wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, enhanced water quality, and high value wood products.

36% of the Landscape would include maintenance of existing populations of Southern yellow pine and Oak. They're growing – but the overcrowded stands keep the next generation from getting the sunlight needed to take hold. The Landscape needs a diverse and resilient forest structure that is home to multiple thriving generations. (Up to 12,400 acres of Southern yellow pine and 43,800 acres of Oak and Oak-Pine)

Just 4% of the Landscape would see restoration where conditions need to be reset by removing trees that are growing where they shouldn't be and replanting with the tree species that should be there, providing native habitat and rebuilding a healthy forest that is more resilient to a changing climate. (Up to 7,500 acres of restoration, including restoring 1,700 acres of off-site pine plantations to Southern yellow pine and Oak)

36%

4%

More opportunities for loops in the Willis Knob and Jake & Bull Trail Systems



28%

80 miles, 28% of all the Forest Service roads in the Foothills Landscape, are within 300 feet of streams and rivers and include hundreds of stream crossings. This project would improve and better maintain our road system, especially in areas where erosion and sedimentation are threats to water quality and aquatic habitats. Bottomless culverts will allow passage for native fishes and other aquatic organisms. Improved road conditions create more opportunities for sustainable access for hunters, anglers and adventurers of all types!



The Foothills Landscape is rich with cultural, historic and archaeological resources. These aspects are important considerations in the management of these lands. In close consultation with tribal governments, Georgia's State Historic Preservation Office, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and professional archaeologists, we've developed management goals for resources located in the Landscape, including an ethnographic study of rock art sites, tribal monitoring, and the development of plans to manage special sites and resources – to include historic farmsteads, Civilian Conservation Corps facilities, mining sites, historic logging, and soapstone quarries.



## RECREATION THAT LASTS

### Managing for sustainable enjoyment of our lands

Sustainable Recreation means providing opportunities that are economically, socially and environmentally enduring for current and future generations. The ways visitors use the forest have changed over time. Most visitors today prefer either developed sites with modern infrastructure or remote backcountry experiences where they can find solitude. And while our goal is to provide ample opportunities for people to connect with their public lands, the national forest cannot be all things to all people in all places. Budgets have been reduced while costs to upgrade or replace aged infrastructure continue to climb.

We're taking a hard look at the opportunities offered in the Foothills Landscape. There are currently 15 developed recreation areas, nearly 200 miles of trails, and vast hunting, fishing, camping and educational opportunities. It's a place cherished by millions of visitors each year. We must plan for the future. That's what this project is designed to do in the Foothills.

15 trail miles would be closed

50 miles of new trail would be created

111 miles of trail would see reroutes to improve experience and lessen resource damage



2.9 million

2.9 million people visit Georgia's national forests each year for a variety of outstanding recreation opportunities.

### TRAILS

- Create new trails or new uses on existing trails at Chattooga River Corridor, Willis Knob, Bear Creek, Jake & Bull, Stonewall/White Twister, and Warwoman
- Convert roads to trails at Bear Creek and Pinhoti
- Add connectors, reroutes, and/or loops to existing trail systems
- Close low-use or unsustainable trails including Milma, Rocky Flats, sections of Tatum, Tibbs, Peeples, Murrays and Sumac

### RECREATION SITES

- Designate new campgrounds, day-use sites and sustainable dispersed camping areas
- Expand sites, upgrade amenities, or change use at existing developed recreation areas
- Create new amenities or infrastructure needed to enhance experience and/or restore watershed health in dispersed areas
- Define parking and improve access to popular dispersed camping areas
- Rehab unsustainable dispersed sites and restore to natural conditions
- Remove amenities and infrastructure at unsustainable sites including Oakey Mountain and Boggs Creek campgrounds



**50** acres  
of canebrake  
restoration

Canebrakes were once a widespread habitat especially important to butterflies and other insects, migratory birds and small mammals. In addition to their unique ecological role, canebrakes were also an important cultural and economic resource for southeastern tribes throughout history. Up to 98% of canebrake ecosystems have disappeared since colonial times. Many floodplains were converted to agriculture, an invasion of exotic species worked to displace native cane, and the historic exclusion of fire limited its ability to thrive. Canebrake restoration would be focused in areas of the Foothills Landscape where small, scattered patches of cane still exist.

## UNIQUE AND THREATENED HABITATS

### Conserving and restoring rare communities

A purpose of the Foothills Landscape project is to improve, maintain or restore unique habitats contributing to the recovery of threatened and endangered species or enhance unique and rare communities contributing to biodiversity. Open woodlands, canebrakes, wetlands, bogs, riparian corridors and headwater streams are threatened by the encroachment of undesirable vegetation, non-native invasive species, and past land uses including the exclusion of fire. Maintaining and restoring the characteristic structure, composition and function of rare communities is what this project is designed to do in the Foothills.



**7,400** acres  
of woodland habitat  
restoration would benefit  
rare species like the  
Northern pine snake.

Many species need stream habitat that offers structural complexity for cover, reproduction and finding food. By adding woody debris and maintaining in-stream structures, this project would create shallow riffles, pools and cover for species like brook trout that need diverse habitat for all life stages. Stabilizing stream banks using native vegetation where erosion is occurring would trap sediment, improve fish and wildlife habitat, improve shade and enhance beauty. Lakes and ponds would have structures installed to improve fish habitat, and small vernal or seasonal pools would be created to provide needed habitat for amphibians.



**1,162** miles  
of streams in the  
Foothills Landscape



**6** acres of experimental American Chestnut orchards would be created

The small whorled pogonia is a federally-listed threatened species found in the Foothills. The tiny native orchid seems to require small light gaps and can be limited by shade. This project would use an adaptive management strategy to determine what activities generate the most positive response in this species.



This project would increase efforts to conserve declining hemlock trees in the Foothills Landscape. Existing Hemlock Conservation Areas would be expanded by up to 600 acres. In these areas, insecticides may be used to suppress the hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA). New research shows that hemlocks growing in light environments withstand HWA better, so this project would allow thinning around hemlocks to let varying amounts of sunlight reach them. Hemlock seedlings would be planted to add structural and age diversity. Predator beetles would continue to be introduced, and sustainable insectaries would be created to provide potential for a viable population of predator beetles now and into the restorable future.



**600** acres added to existing Hemlock Conservation Areas



With valued partners, up to **103 acres** of mountain bog habitat would be restored with plantings of rare species, removal of encroaching vegetation, and the raising of stream profiles where feasible. Southern Appalachian mountain bogs are one of Georgia's rarest and most incredible habitats.

The Foothills Landscape – 157,625 acres – stretches across the Chattahoochee National Forest and marks the area where the mountains are visibly reduced to foothills. It includes a portions of Dawson, Fannin, Gilmer, Habersham, Lumpkin, Murray, Rabun and White counties.

**Project Vision:** To create, restore and maintain ecosystems that are more resilient to natural disturbances. Specifically, the Forest Service is seeking to enhance and provide quality habitat for rare and declining species, as well as desired game and non-game species; to reduce hazardous fuel loading across the landscape to diminish damaging wildfires; to improve soil and water quality; to provide sustainable recreation and access opportunities; and to awaken and strengthen a connection to these lands for all people.

**Purpose and Need:** The Foothills Landscape Project would maintain or improve watershed and ecological conditions by addressing the need to improve biologic integrity, increase the ecosystem's resilience to disturbance, restore connectivity, and support high water quality and soil productivity.



Comment online and view the Foothills Landscape Project Environmental Assessment, maps, background information and more at [www.fs.usda.gov/goto/Foothills](http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/Foothills).



*Photos: USFWS- ruffed grouse, small whorled pogonia, brook trout; GaDNR- pine snake; USDA- all others*  
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