



NATIONAL FORESTS IN NORTH • CAROLINA

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Forest Service Approves Highlands- Wayah Ranger District Consolidation

ASHEVILLE, NC.....The U.S. Forest Service announced today that it has received final Washington Office approval for its proposal to consolidate the Highlands and Wayah Ranger Districts on the Nantahala National Forest. The newly named “Nantahala” Ranger District will be stationed in Franklin, NC, at the current Wayah Ranger District office location. Some Forest Service information and services will still be available in Highlands, but at a reduced level.

According to National Forests in North Carolina Supervisor Marisue Hilliard, “This was not a decision that was quickly or easily made. From our discussions with employees and the people of Highlands we know they had concerns that it may become more difficult for people in the Highlands area to get information and permits and other services with the Ranger District office being moved 21 miles away. To lessen this impact, we plan to take the following steps:

- **Maintain the Highlands Work Center.** This will enable us to stage firefighters and equipment during high fire danger times so we can respond more rapidly to wildfires. We will also closely coordinate with the NC Division of Forest

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Resources and local volunteer fire departments and search and rescue units to ensure we are able to respond to wildfires and other emergencies in a timely manner.”

“Additionally, keeping the Work Center in Highlands will help us better maintain forest recreation facilities and conduct work on national forest lands in the Highlands Cashiers area”, Hilliard added. “We can also continue to provide facility support to the NC Division of Forestry Christmas tree seedling orchard located near the Work Center.”

- **Maintain the Downtown Information Station** This “store front” facility will continue to be run by the Cradle of Forestry Interpretive Association and provide maps and a variety of visitor information about the national forests. This facility will be open Monday through Saturday from Memorial Day to November and on weekends in April and May and November . The Forest Service will also provide a Forest employee at this facility during peak times or at other scheduled times to offer firewood permits, special forest product permits, and recreational season passes as well as answer more detailed questions about the Forest.
- **All of the current recreation facilities on the Highlands District will remain open.** Nantahala District Ranger Mike Wilkins added, “All of the resources, recreation areas and other special areas in the Highlands area are important to us. We are committed to maintaining these treasured forest resources.”

The Forest Service is planning to hold an open house at the current Highlands Ranger District office on Flat Mountain Road on Tuesday March 13 from noon to 8 pm to answer questions about the consolidation and how to get the information and services they need.

“Consolidation of these two districts is just one of a number of steps we are taking to reduce costs and improve efficiency in light of continued tight budgets and ever

increasing personnel and facility costs,” Hilliard said. “We are reducing the number of employees on all of the Pisgah and Nantahala Districts and in the Forest Supervisor’s office in Asheville. The reality is that, like other agencies and the private sector, we have to stay within our budget. Personnel and contracting costs continue to climb while our overall budget is flat. If we did nothing in a very short time, perhaps as soon as one or two years we would not be able to even make our payroll, much less have enough money left over to maintain the facilities and services we provide to the public.”

“Over the last year and a half, a team of Forest Service employees has been working on an overall reorganization strategy for all National Forest sites in North Carolina to look the best ways to reduce costs and improve efficiencies while maintaining as much as possible service to the public,” Hilliard said. “Because of their close proximity (21 miles apart) the Wayah and Highlands District offices were identified by the team as feasible for consolidation as long as ways could be found of maintaining an acceptable level of service to visitors and residents of the Highlands area. Reducing our fixed costs by reducing the number of administrative sites provides more money to do work on the ground. We expect to accomplish our reorganization goals through a combination of transfers, retirements and not filling vacant positions. No Forest employees have been laid off as a result of this reorganization. Most employees currently working out of the Highlands office will now be working out of Franklin. ”

“This is not the first or only district consolidation for the National Forests in North Carolina,” Hilliard added. “Several years ago we combined the French Broad District in Hot Springs with the Toecane District in Burnsville. A new Appalachian District office is scheduled to be built in Mars Hill next year.”

The Forest expects to close its Highlands District Office by June 1. It is likely that this office facility, a former residence, will be offered for sale sometime next year.

For more information, contact Nantahala District Ranger Mike Wilkins at 828-524-6441

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