

News Release



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For Immediate Release

Second Public Meeting about Chattooga River Set for November 17 in Clayton, GA;

Third Meeting Scheduled for December 1 in Walhalla, SC

(Columbia, South Carolina, October 27, 2005) – The USDA Forest Service will conduct its second public meeting and workshop regarding the reanalysis of recreation use on the upper reaches of the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River on Thursday, November 17, beginning at 5 p.m. at the Clayton Baptist Church’s Ministry Activities Center, 87 South Church Street, Clayton, GA.

The third meeting is set for Thursday, December 1, beginning at 5 p.m. at the First Baptist Church, 403 East Main Street, Walhalla, SC.

Both meetings are continuing the process that began in October in Walhalla, SC, an anticipated two-year Visitor Use Capacity Analysis focused on the river’s recreation use above the bridge at Highway 28.

The November meeting will begin with a question-and-answer session, when the Forest Service team leading this reanalysis process will answer questions raised at the first public meeting in October and take additional questions from those in attendance.

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Next Chattooga River Public Meetings Set for November 17, December 1

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“This won’t be a public hearing format, when people speak to enter their comments for or against something into the official record,” said Jerome Thomas, Supervisor of the Francis Marion and Sumter National Forests in South Carolina. “But it will be an opportunity for dialogue – for the public to hear answers to questions raised at the last meeting, and to ask other questions. We hope this moves us closer to working collaboratively throughout this entire process.”

October Meeting

Just more than 100 people attended the first meeting and generated a number of written questions about the reanalysis work the Forest Service is leading. Agency officials want to try to answer those questions before moving any further into this process, Thomas said.

Some attending the October meeting requested a formal hearing-style public meeting, and the Forest Service now plans to conduct a meeting like that later during the reanalysis work, Thomas said. “We want to try to be responsive to all the comments we received about how people want to be involved in this process,” he said.

November Meeting

The question-and-answer session is scheduled to last the first hour of the November meeting. Following a break, the Forest Service will reconvene the attendees beginning at 6:30 p.m. for an expected two-hour workshop on the first three steps of a visitor use capacity analysis.

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The objective of this process is to address impacts of public use and to preserve the environmental setting and resources for future recreational use – and the public is an integral part of this process.

In the first portion of the November workshop, small groups will review a proposal by a Forest Service team that delineates areas of the Chattooga River above Highway 28 into “zones,” or areas with similar resource and social conditions. These proposed zones are consistent with the river’s Wild and Scenic classifications as designated by the U.S. Congress. After agreeing with or modifying the proposed zones, the groups will define the recreation opportunities that are suitable within each zone. Finally, the groups will work to define desired conditions by zone and recreation opportunity, developing a brief description of conditions they wish to see in the area.

December Meeting

At the next meeting in December, groups will tackle the next two steps of the LAC process. Building on work from the November meeting, groups will first recommend specific, measurable indicators associated with the overall recreation opportunity and desired condition (such as number of trail encounters per day). Then, groups will suggest data needs for those indicators and how that data could be collected.

For example, a data need could be the acceptable number of human encounters by all users. Possible methods to collect that data could be user surveys, focus groups, user trials, or proxy analysis (comparing impacts from similar users on similar rivers). Groups at the December meeting also will be asked to list the advantages and disadvantages of the suggested data collection methods.

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The Next Steps

After the December meeting, the Forest Service plans to determine what data collection methods will be used and begin that work in January 2006.

When the entire LAC process is completed, Forest Service employees will analyze various alternatives regarding management of the upper reaches of the Chattooga River corridor. These alternatives will be built using information collected from the public throughout the LAC process. Then, the Forest Service will make a final decision that will include specific actions aimed at managing recreation use with acceptable natural resource impacts.

For information about this reanalysis process, including a timeline, comments received from public meetings and email, and a bulletin board where people can exchange information, ideas, and opinions about this project, log onto the forests' website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/fms>. Any pre-work for the upcoming meetings also will be available on the website.

Background

The Chattooga River is the upstate boundary between South Carolina and Georgia, and its headwaters are in North Carolina. Since the mid-1970s – when the Chattooga was designated by the U.S. Congress as a Wild and Scenic River – boating above Highway 28 has been prohibited. In January 2004, the Forest Service revised its plan to manage the Sumter National Forest, including the Chattooga River. That plan,

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signed by the agency's Regional Forester in Atlanta, allowed floating to continue only on the portion of the river downstream from the Highway 28 bridge. Boating organization, American Whitewater, didn't agree with the portion of the plan focusing on the Chattooga River, and filed an appeal with the Forest Service's Washington Office.

In April 2005, the Reviewing Officer for the Chief of the Forest Service decided to send that part of the plan back to the Regional Forester and the Sumter National Forest for additional work. While the appeal decision does not direct that the decision be changed, it does direct the forest to conduct additional analysis regarding social and natural resource impacts on the river and to involve affected and interested parties. The Sumter National Forest will lead the reanalysis, working with two other national forests that share the river: the Chattahoochee National Forest in Georgia, and the National Forests in North Carolina.

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