



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Chattahoochee-Oconee
National Forests
Supervisor's Office

1755 Cleveland Highway
Gainesville, GA 30501
(770) 297-3000

File Code: 1600

Date: November 16, 2007

Dear Friend,

Although I haven't officially begun my new position as Forest Supervisor on the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests, I wanted to make you aware of my plans for addressing the issue of cross country travel by equestrians on the national forests in Georgia. I want you to know that this issue is an important one for me and that I am planning to work closely with the equestrian community as we move forward in further defining the appropriate use of National Forest lands by equestrians and developing opportunities for equestrians to enjoy riding on the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests.

During my time in Georgia this past summer, I was fortunate to be able to attend several meetings between Forest Service personnel and equestrian club members. During these meetings I heard a lot of areas of agreement. I heard that Forest Service employees and members of the horse community are dedicated to protecting the natural resources of the forest. I heard agreement on the desire for clean water and healthy watersheds. I heard we are committed to protecting rare or endangered plants and animals. We agreed on the need and desire to provide a safe and enjoyable riding experience for equestrians on the national forest.

During these meetings we also heard many concerns about the Forest Service proposal to close the national forests in Georgia to cross country horse travel. Some of these concerns centered around the potential impacts that closing the forest to cross country travel would have on existing designated trails. We heard the question, "Can our trail system sustain the anticipated increased travel that would come if you close the rest of the forest to horseback riding?" We also heard from individuals that there are needs at some of our current trailheads, trail systems, parking lots, watering holes and camping facilities to make them more 'user-friendly.' We heard that eliminating cross country travel would force the equestrian community into traveling on one-way in and one-way out paths that would soon grow tiresome. We also heard concerns about riding on roads.

We have a long history of great partnerships with the equestrian community. You have given your time, money and knowledge in helping us build and maintain the system of trails that we have today on the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests. We want to continue this partnership and honor the spirit of working together. As we move forward this year, I want to build on our areas of agreement as we address the areas of concern. I want to ensure that our



process takes a look at all the impacts to and from equestrian travel and of potential restrictions on equestrian travel on the national forest.

What I plan to do is to go through a very specific analysis process which will include full public involvement. We will look at the impacts of equestrian use on existing trails and what the potential impacts will be if cross country equestrian use is eliminated. We will look at the current network of trails to see if there are opportunities for improvement. We will consider access issues and facility needs. We will also consider the botanical and cultural resources in the area and come up with alternative ways to protect those resources.

I have spoken to Ranger Erin Bronk on the Oconee National Forest about beginning our effort on that unit. I anticipate that this process will take about a year to complete for the Oconee Ranger District. As with any environmental analysis, we consider desired outcomes and potential impacts of a variety of alternatives. One of the options to consider is continuing with closure of the forest to cross country equestrian travel. We will consider other alternatives such as a 'no action' alternative which would mean that the rules and regulations that are currently in place which allow cross country travel will remain. Other alternatives may be developed as issues are identified. Again, this will be done with full public involvement.

I realize that there is a lot of misinformation about what the Forest Service will or will not do in regards to horseback riding. I want to make sure that the most accurate information is given to you, our partners, as soon as we have it available. I encourage you to check our website often and if you have a question, please call me or one of my staff at (770) 297-3000. Larry Luckett, Karen McKenzie or Paul Bradley will be happy to speak with you to help answer questions.

Additionally, I realize that this is a different direction than what we originally shared with you this past summer on what we are going to do here in Georgia. To help foster understanding and participation in the process, my staff and I are willing to make ourselves available to come back and meet with your clubs at any time of your convenience. We want to have an open, inclusive process and this is best accomplished when we have a clear understanding of our objectives and plan of action.

I look forward to working with you in the coming years. Thank you for your interest in our beautiful national forests.

Sincerely,

/s/ George Bain

GEORGE BAIN
Forest Supervisor