

Decision Memo

Cohutta Wilderness
Limits of Acceptable Change Implementation

USDA Forest Service
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest
Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District
Murray, Gilmer, Fannin Counties, Georgia and Polk County, Tennessee

I. DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE

I have decided to approve the proposed management actions for the Cohutta Wilderness that were developed from the recommendations of a citizen-based wilderness Task Force using the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) planning process. The Cohutta Wilderness is a 36,977-acre tract of National Forest land federally designated as wilderness in 1975 and located in Murray, Gilmer and Fannin County, Georgia and Polk County, Tennessee.

The purpose of this decision is to both preserve the wilderness character and provide for the enjoyment of an unimpaired wilderness for present and future generations of Americans. The applied prohibitions and limits on use will help to reverse patterns of overuse, reduce human activities contributing to resource impacts, restore the wilderness environment, and provide more opportunities for solitude and a true wilderness experience.

The purpose of the permit system is to obtain more accurate visitor counts, and to provide an avenue for wilderness education and public information regarding the changes in management for the Cohutta Wilderness.

The following management actions will be implemented:

1. The Cohutta Wilderness will be managed as three distinct Opportunity Classes (OC), I, II and III. These “opportunities” would provide a range of experiences from the most primitive, Opportunity Class I, to the least primitive, Opportunity Class III. The Opportunity Classes are further defined as follows:

Opportunity Class I. This Opportunity Class will exist throughout the wilderness, out of sight or sound (300 feet) from any trail, trailhead, perimeter road, the Jacks or Conasauga rivers, management designated campsites, and major natural attractions such as the Jacks River Falls. This Opportunity Class is essentially the main body of the wilderness, outside of the two named river corridors, where no designated trails are found, but where more opportunity for solitude and a true wilderness experience exists. Little to no sign of human influence will be found here.

Opportunity Class II. This Opportunity Class will exist as a corridor along maintained trails that receive light to moderate use. The corridor is measured as 300 feet on either side of the following trails: Benton MacKaye, Chestnut Lead, Chestnut Mountain, East Cowpen, Hemp Top, Hickory Ridge, Panther Creek, Penitentiary Branch, Rice Camp, Rough Ridge, Sugar Cove, Tearbitches, and Hickory Creek trail north of the Conasauga River. Visitor contacts occur randomly and vary seasonally. Opportunities for solitude exist but less so when approaching higher density visitor

use areas within Opportunity Class III. Signs of human use will be found along the trail system and at occasional campsites.

Opportunity Class III. This Opportunity Class will include lands within sight or sound (300 feet) of any trailhead or perimeter road, the Jacks and Conasauga rivers, major natural attractions and high use designated trails including the Jacks River, Conasauga River, and Hickory Creek trail south of the Conasauga river. Visitor encounters on trails and at camp are common with limited opportunity for solitude during peak visitation seasons. Human influence is most evident here with some persistent site impacts present.

Embedded within Opportunity Class III is a smaller opportunity area identified as the Jacks River Falls Area (JRFA). This area will include lands within 300 feet of the Jacks River Falls and its immediate environment, Beech Creek and the Beech Bottom trail. From the Jacks River trail river crossing about 0.5 miles upriver of the Falls, to the next trail river crossing about one mile below the Falls is included with the JRFA. It is the most heavily visited and degraded area in the Cohutta Wilderness. Little opportunity for solitude and a wilderness experience is available. Human-caused resource damage is extensive. Primary emphasis in this area will be preservation of the natural environment in the midst of high visitor pressure on a major scenic attraction, Jacks River Falls.

2. Within the three opportunity classes, the following limits on use will be applied to reduce human impacts on the wilderness resource and restore the wilderness environment:

LIMITS ON USE	OPPORTUNITY CLASS I	OPPORTUNITY CLASS II	OPPORTUNITY CLASS III
Size of Hiking Groups	4	12	12
Size of Equestrian Groups (a)	3	8	8
Organized Groups per Day (b)	2	4	4
Campsite Distance from Streams (c)	25 ft	50 ft	50 ft
Campsite Distance from Trails	N/A	20 ft	20 ft
Tents per Campsite	2	4	4
Horses per Campsite	3	8	8
Campers per Campsite	4	8	12
Designated Campsites (c) (none specifically for equestrians)	0	Yes, in some areas	Yes
Campsite Size Limits	0	400 sq. ft.	800 sq. ft.
Adjacent Campsites Visible	0	2	4
Distance Between Campsites	1320 ft	300 - 2640 ft	75 - 300 ft
Campsites per Mile of Trail	N/A	0 - 13	13 - 26+
Fire Rings per Campsite	0 (d)	1	1
Fire Ring Maximum Diameter	0 (d)	18 in	18 in

- (a) The number in equestrian groups is the maximum number of horses and riders taken separately. For example in OC II, a group size of 8 means 8 horses and 8 riders.
- (b) Examples include non-commercial church, scout, school, therapeutic groups. Groups must have a free group permit.
- (c) Campsites must be placed at least 50 ft. from streams and rivers in OC II and III, and 25 ft. in OC

- I. Camping will be confined to campsites designated by the Forest Service in OC III. In OC II and III, the Forest Service may establish designated campsites less than 50 ft. from streams and rivers when terrain and resource conditions are favorable.
- (d) Fire rings are not allowed in OC I. Fuel stoves and campfires using the mound fire or pit fire method are permitted.
3. Within the Jacks River Falls Area, the following area-specific prohibitions will be established (in addition to those use limits listed above for OC III) to reverse overuse, to reduce activities contributing to significant resource impacts, and to restore the wilderness environment:
- a. No overnight camping permitted. An exception in the Beech Bottom area will allow for the creation of 8-12 designated "cold weather" campsites for use from November 1 through March 31.

The management action I have decided to approve is different from what was proposed and described in the 12/10/02 scoping letter. It was proposed to allow for 10-12 designated "cold weather" campsites. I have decided to reduce the number of designated campsites allowed to 8-12 because the Beech Bottom area may not accommodate 10-12 suitable campsites.

- b. Day Use Area Only.
- c. No campfires permitted.

The management action I have decided to approve is different from what was proposed and described in the 12/10/02 scoping letter. It was proposed to allow for mound fires or pit fires (no fire rings) to be constructed at the 10-12 designated campsites in the Beech Bottom area during the cold weather season of use. My decision is to prohibit campfires year around in the Jacks River Falls area that includes Beech Bottom. My reason for this total prohibition on campfires is because firewood is extremely sparse in this particular area and allowing cold weather campfires would likely result in the cutting of green vegetation for fuel. The primary emphasis of management in the Jacks River Falls area is the preservation of the natural environment in the midst of high visitor pressure on a major scenic attraction, Jacks River Falls.

- d. No alcoholic beverages permitted.
4. A non-restrictive, mandatory permit system will be implemented for the purpose of more accurate visitor counts, wilderness education, and public information regarding the new regulations and limits for the Cohutta Wilderness.

II. REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment when they are within one of the categories identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 7 CFR part 1b.3 or one of the categories identified by the Chief of the Forest Service in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 sections 31.1b or 31.2, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative environmental effect.

A. Category of Exclusion

The specific category – identified in the Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, “Environmental Policy and Procedures” Section 31.1b – is described below:

Category 1 – Orders issued pursuant to 36 CFR Part 261: Prohibitions to provide short-term resource protection or to protect public health and safety.

B. Relationship to Extraordinary Circumstances

The District interdisciplinary team for the Cohutta Wilderness management actions conducted the environmental analysis. The ID team consisted of the following individuals:

Debra Whitman – District Ranger
Larry Thomas – Operations Leader
Mike Davis – Wilderness Ranger

Based on interdisciplinary team findings, I have determined that no extraordinary circumstances exist that could cause the actions involved to have significant effects. On the other hand, the management actions to be implemented in the congressionally designated Cohutta Wilderness are to correct resource impacts that, left unchecked, have the potential to become significant effects.

III. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement began in October 2000 when nearly 400 scoping letters were sent to parties with a known interest in the Cohutta Wilderness and news releases were submitted to eight area newspapers to announce the Forest Service’s intention to consider changes in management of the Cohutta Wilderness. The public was requested to submit their wilderness issues and concerns.

In December 2000, three public meetings were held in Atlanta and Dalton, GA and Cleveland, TN. At these meetings, attended by a total of 139 people, the purpose and need for the project and the LAC process were explained and all persons wishing to participate further were invited to become part of a LAC Task Force. The Task Force was open to any and all citizens.

The Task Force began its series of monthly meetings in March 2001 consisting of 35 persons and concluded its work in February 2002 with the completion of the 9-step LAC process and a list of recommended actions to Forest Service management.

On November 9, 2002, a journalist with the Atlanta-Journal Constitution (AJC) newspaper accompanied USFS Wilderness Ranger Mike Davis on a site visit to the Cohutta Wilderness. A follow-up article reporting on proposed wilderness management changes and requests for public input appeared in the AJC on November 18, 2002.

On December 10, 2002, a scoping letter was sent out to 380 interested persons requesting comment on proposed management actions for the Cohutta Wilderness. The same scoping notice was sent to six area newspapers for publication on this date. The notice was posted on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest website on December 11, 2002.

Eighty public responses to the scoping notice were received. Seventy responses supported the proposal. Ten did not favor the proposal in whole or in part. Of those ten, four preferred no change from the status quo, two opposed the alcohol prohibition in the Jacks River Falls Area, and four preferred more lenient use limits.

IV. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY AND/OR RELATED TO OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

My decision will comply with all applicable laws and regulations. I have summarized some pertinent ones below.

As described in the Chattahoochee-Oconee Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), as amended, the area encompassed by my decision is within Management Area 1. The management goals for Management Area 1 are to preserve the area's wilderness character and manage for future use and enjoyment as wilderness.

As required by the National Forest Management Act of 1976, I have determined that this action is consistent with the Forest Plan, as amended. It adheres to applicable standards, guidelines, and monitoring requirements in the Forest Plan.

This project complies with the seven requirements of 36 CFR 219.27(b) by following the Forest-wide standards and guidelines as mentioned above.

For water quality management, the direction of Georgia state approved "Best Management Practices" (BMPs) will be met through implementation of the Forest Plan standards and guidelines for this project. These BMPs are from State water quality management plans and have been designed with the goal of producing water that meets or exceeds State water quality standards.

The planning and implementation of this decision complies with the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Forest Management Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, and the National Historic Preservation Act and their implementing regulations.

The management actions to be implemented were developed from the recommendations of a citizen-based Task Force representing the many user groups that utilize the Cohutta Wilderness. Open to any and all persons, the Task Force consisted of members of various backgrounds differing widely in their opinions and ideas for wilderness management. However, they all shared a common vision: to preserve the Cohutta Wilderness and protect it from human-caused resource damage. The recommended actions will affect all wilderness users by improving the opportunity for solitude and a true wilderness experience while improving environmental conditions. This action will not discriminate against anyone on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, marital or familial status.

V. ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL

This decision is not subject to a higher level of administrative review or appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.8 (a) (4).

VI. IMPLEMENTATION DATE

Implementation of this decision may begin immediately (36 CFR 215.10).

VII. CONTACT PERSON

For further information concerning this decision contact Debra Whitman, Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District, 3941 Highway 76, Chatsworth, GA, 30705. Telephone (706) 695-6736, between the hours of 8:00 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday.

VIII. SIGNATURE AND DATE

I have concluded that this decision may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment as it is within one of the categories identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 7 CFR part 1b.3 or one of the categories identified by the Chief of the Forest Service in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 sections 31.1b or 31.2, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative environmental effect. My conclusion is based on information presented in this document and the entirety of the Planning Record.

/s/ Debra L. Whitman

DEBRA L. WHITMAN
District Ranger

March 14, 2003

Date