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Date: March 31, 2008

Dear Forest User:

The Blue Ridge Ranger District is seeking public comments on proposed projects to enhance stream habitat conditions in Towns, Union, and Fannin Counties, Georgia. The projects are designed to enhance brook trout habitat, which is Georgia's only native trout species. The present range of brook trout in Georgia has been significantly reduced from historical levels due to a variety of factors, including historic land use practices and the introduction of nonnative rainbow and brown trout. This is part of an ongoing cooperative effort between the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the Chattahoochee National Forest, Trout Unlimited, US Fish and Wildlife Service and other partners to protect and enhance Georgia's brook trout populations.

The brook trout streams on the Blue Ridge Ranger District proposed for habitat improvement are three streams in the Hiawasee River watershed which contain southern strain brook trout: Gurley Creek, Big Net Branch and High Shoals. Habitat structures are also proposed for Stover Creek in the Noontootla Watershed. Habitat improvements will be the installation and maintenance of habitat structures. These structures would be installed with hand labor. The logs used to construct the structures will be obtained from nearby trees. In many cases, recently blown over trees are available near these streams and will be utilized. This work would occur in 2008 and 2009. The locations of these projects are shown on the attached map.

The purpose of the project is to enhance stream habitat conditions for brook trout and other aquatic species which will move these areas toward the desired conditions in the Forest Plan. All of the stream segments proposed for work are low gradient, with limited cover and pool habitat. The proposed stream habitat improvement work is designed to improve habitat conditions by deepening pools, constricting the channel to flush sediments, providing cover, and stabilizing stream banks to prevent further erosion. The project will address several Forest Plan goals and objectives including the restoration and maintenance of aquatic ecosystems for all native and desired nonnative species of aquatic flora and fauna (Goal 26) and specifically the restoration of brook trout on the Forest (Objective 26.4).

Work also proposed includes repair of the road crossing on Little Rock Creek, in the Rock Creek Watershed on FS Road 249. Currently, this crossing is an open ford. Geo-web was installed at this crossing approximately 20 years ago and it is failing due to wear. We propose to install a geo-web or other type of low water crossing material to harden this site. A third project proposed is to install baffles in an existing culvert on Bryant Creek, FS Road 33A, in the Cooper Creek Watershed. The culvert currently is a barrier to fish passage and the installation of baffles would allow for passage. Rocks would be fastened to the culvert in a manner to allow fish to rest behind in order to swim the length of the culvert pipe. In addition, stream work at the downstream outlet will be raised with native materials to decrease the plunge. The culvert on Bryant Creek will also have maintenance at the upstream opening to restrict flow around the outside edges of the pipe. This will force more flow into the pipe allowing for better fish passage during low flow and will



also improve the stability of the pipe. Both of these streams, Bryant and Little Rock are small brook trout streams.

Additional work involves the installation of a barrier to prevent the encroachment of non-native trout (rainbow and brown trout) on Stover Creek. This barrier would be installed with hand labor. Brook trout are not capable of out-competing the non-native trout, resulting in a decline in their numbers or in their extirpation from that particular stretch of stream. Non-native rainbow and brown trout would be removed from above the barrier through electro-fishing. This removal would eliminate the competition with the native brook trout. As needed, brook trout would be collected for stocking from streams where brook trout numbers are high. These fish would be transported to Stover Creek and released. These fish would be of the southern strain of brook trout, the ones that are native to this region.

The work is a partnership effort between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Trout Unlimited (TU), North Georgia Trout Online (NGTO) and the Chattahoochee National Forest. Funding to accomplish brook trout restoration work across the Forest, including much of the work proposed here has been requested from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Volunteers with TU and NGTO will assist in the installation of these structures. In addition, the work proposed is also a result of the draft “Brook Trout Management Plan”, a cooperative plan written by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and US Forest Service. This plan prioritized work on brook trout streams within each watershed across the Chattahoochee National Forest.

All Best Management Practices (BMP’s) and Forest Plan Standards will be followed. Any stream bank disturbance would be mitigated by seeding with native plants or non-persistent non-native species, and mulching any exposed soils that result from the proposed activities.

We are currently in the process of determining the significant environmental issues and public concerns. You can help us in completing our analysis by providing comments on this proposal as we have described it. Your comments should be as specific as possible and contain the following information: your name and address, the project name (Brook Trout Habitat Improvement Projects), and specific facts or comments along with the supporting reasons you believe your comments should be considered by the Deciding Official in reaching a decision. You may respond to the Blue Ridge Ranger District office at the address below:

Jim Wentworth
U.S. Forest Service
P.O. Box 9
Blairsville, GA 30514

You may also provide your comments by fax at (706) 745-7494 (Blue Ridge R.D.), or e-mail your comments to jwentworth@fs.fed.us. If you have any questions about this project please direct them to Jim Wentworth on the Blue Ridge District. To have your comments considered in our planning process we need to receive your reply by April 30, 2008.

Thank you for your time and interest in the management activities on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest.

Sincerely,

/s/ Alan Polk

ALAN POLK
DISTRICT RANGER

Attachments: Project Area Maps