



File Code: 1950/2620

Date: September 1, 2006

Dear Interested Forest Stakeholder:

The Chattooga and Tallulah Ranger Districts are seeking public comments on several proposed projects which would enhance stream habitat conditions in Habersham and Rabun Counties, Georgia. The projects are designed to enhance habitat for the brook trout, 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 proposal is part of an ongoing cooperative effort between the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the Chattahoochee National Forest, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Trout Unlimited and other partners to protect and enhance Georgia's brook trout populations. The Forest Service is also working with the US Army Corps of Engineers for compliance under 404 jurisdictions.



Brook Trout Netted During Population Surveys

Summary of the Proposal

Brook trout enhancement projects include the following activities: (1) brook trout culvert replacements, (2) habitat enhancement, (3) brook trout restoration and (4) brook trout rehabilitation. These projects would occur over the next 3-5 years and work would then be prioritized based on the best chance of success as determined by the interdisciplinary team.

1. The proposed brook trout culvert replacements are, in part, a result of potential funding from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. This funding is for the enhancement of brook trout streams by providing culverts which will allow for easier fish passage. More specifically, the purpose of this project is to remove culverts which are currently barriers to brook trout passage. These culverts would be replaced with open arch crossings. Removing these barriers is important to prevent fragmentation of brook trout populations.

Five brook trout streams on the Chattooga and Tallulah Ranger Districts proposed for culvert replacement are: Smith Branch (Totterypole watershed) on FS Road 86C; Bailey Branch (West Fork Chattooga watershed) on FS Road 7; Hannah Branch (Tallulah watershed) on FS Road 163; and both forks of Popcorn Creek (Tallulah) on FS Road 163. Maps of the project areas are available on the internet at <http://www.fs.fed.us/conf/> (under the Forest Planning tab), or can be obtained by contacting the Tallulah Ranger District (see below for phone number).



These five culverts are currently barriers and would be replaced with open arch crossings that would not impede or alter stream flows. These open arches would allow and improve fish passage. Two additional culverts are proposed to have baffles installed, Walnut Fork (Warwoman watershed) on FS Road 155 and Ammons (West Fork Chattooga watershed) on FS Road 696. Baffles would be installed in these two existing culverts to provide resting slackwater areas. Without the addition of baffles, these culverts would remain as barriers due to high water velocities through these long pipes. Baffles would slow velocities and provide the fish with the ability to dart from baffle to baffle to allow for passage. All work would be completed in close coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

2. Habitat enhancement projects are proposed in partnership with Trout Unlimited. Trout streams that are proposed for habitat enhancement would have the following type of work conducted: deepening pools, constricting the channel to flush sediments, providing cover with rock and/or wood materials and stabilizing stream banks to prevent further erosion. All projects would also include the assistance of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Habitat enhancement work is proposed on eight brook trout streams. These are: Keener and Thomas in the Little Tennessee River watershed; South Fork Moccasin, Perry Cove and Persimmon in the Tallulah watershed; Ammons and Holcomb in the Chattooga River watershed and Bailey Branch in the West Fork of the Chattooga watershed. Structures would be installed with hand labor and the use of heavy equipment in some areas. Hand labor would occur where access is limited. Heavy equipment would be used where terrain provides safe passage. Maintenance of habitat structures with hand labor and/or with heavy equipment is also proposed for the Upper Chattahoochee River in the Chattahoochee River watershed. This effort would enhance habitat for rainbow trout, thus improving fishing opportunities.

3. Brook trout restoration is proposed for those streams where past comprehensive surveys indicated there were no brook trout present, but with a high potential for creating a successful population. Proposed work would be to stock brook trout into these streams. Brook trout are the only native trout species in Georgia. These stockings would be of the southern strain of brook trout from streams currently containing high and self sustaining numbers.

Addie Branch and Emory are streams within the Chattooga River watershed proposed for future restoration. These streams were sampled in 2003 and 2005 and no fish were found. Emory was resampled in 2005 and very few brook trout were found from the falls downstream of Hale Ridge Road to the next set of falls above the road. An additional stream, Charlie's Creek (upper) was sampled in 2004 and no fish were collected. It is theorized that the possible loss of brook trout populations could have occurred during an extreme storm event or under extreme drought conditions in these high gradient streams. The habitats in these streams are capable of supporting reproducing populations of brook trout. Further surveys will be conducted to determine the status of these streams. If it is determined that restoration is appropriate for these streams, brook trout would then be collected for stocking from streams where brook trout numbers are high. These fish would be transported to Emory, Addie and Charlie's Creek and released.

4. Evaluating streams for future rehabilitation is proposed for those brook trout streams which currently have high densities of native rainbow trout. Rehabilitation would be accomplished by

removing the non-native rainbow trout and subsequently stocking brook trout. These stockings would also be from streams with high numbers of native brook trout. Future rehabilitation is proposed for Holcomb Creek in the Chattooga River watershed. This stream was sampled in the 1980's, and brook trout and rainbow trout were found above the barrier upstream of Hale Ridge road. Further surveys will indicate the current status of species present. The rehabilitation work proposed would occur above Holcomb Creek Falls. In this stretch of stream, non-native rainbow trout would be removed. This removal would eliminate the competition with the native brook trout, thus allowing an increase in the brook trout population. Removal would be by the use of electrofishing.

In Tate Branch, Tallulah River watershed, it is proposed to have a current barrier maintained to prevent the encroachment of non-native rainbow and brown trout. 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. This work would be completed with hand labor as well as possibly the use of heavy equipment.

This proposal is a result of the draft "Brook Trout Management Plan", a cooperative plan written by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and the USDA Forest Service. This plan prioritized work on brook trout streams within each watershed across the Chattahoochee National Forest. The need for this project is also generated by the goals and objectives in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP, Chapter 2, Goal 26) that addresses the restoration and maintenance of aquatic ecosystems for all native and desired nonnative species of aquatic flora and fauna. Objectives 26.3 and 26.4 specifically address the removal of barriers to fish passage and habitat enhancement for brook trout.



Electro-fishing to Detect Fish Species Present in a Small Watercourse

All Best Management Practices (BMP's) and Forest Plan Standards would 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.

I would like to hear from you regarding these projects before making my decision. It appears these projects would fall under the following Categorical Exclusion in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 "*Environmental Policy and Procedures*" Section 31.2 - Category 7. Modification or maintenance of stream or lake aquatic habitat improvement structures using native materials or normal practices. This determination, however, will not be finalized until after consideration of your comments and concerns. My staff may also use your comments to modify the specific methods described in the proposal.

These project proposals are a starting point for discussion and analysis and no decision has been made. Responses from the local community, interested individuals and groups, other government agencies, and Forest Service employees are needed to help determine the extent of analysis so we meet the intent of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Comments received help us to develop viable options to the proposal, and/or indicate additional mitigation and monitoring measures needed. Please note that you will be sent further correspondence on this proposed project *only* if you comment on it or if you request further correspondence.

Comments must be postmarked or received within 30 days beginning the day after signature of this document. Send your written comments to the Tallulah District office at the address given on the letterhead. You may also provide your comments by phone, fax at (706) 782-2079 (Tallulah R.D.), or e-mail your comments to mgcole@fs.fed.us or mbrod@fs.fed.us. If you have any questions about this project please direct them to Mitzi Cole at 770-297-3075 or Mike Brod at 706-782-3320. Phone or hand-delivered comments may be made at the Ranger District office at (address) within the normal weekday business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. In accordance with regulations, all written comments received, including those submitted electronically, will be placed in the project file and will become a matter of public record.

This letter is being sent to organizations and individuals who have previously participated or been interested in our project proposals. This letter assumes that you have some familiarity with the planning process as conducted by the Forest Service in accordance with NEPA. If you are receiving this letter and are unsure of the context or how to participate, please contact Mitzi Cole or Mike Brod at the above mentioned phone numbers. Management of the National Forest is a public trust and is best conducted with broad participation.

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

Sincerely,

David Scott Hill (for)
DAVID W. JENSEN
District Ranger

Enclosure: Maps of Trout Enhancement Actions.