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Road/Trail Decommissioning and Seasonal Closure Project

Conasauga Ranger District Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests

Fannin, Murray, and Walker Counties, Georgia

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**ROAD/TRAIL DECOMMISSIONING AND SEASONAL CLOSURE PROJECT
Environmental Assessment**

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ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

CHAPTER 1 - PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

INTRODUCTION

Travel is an integral part of virtually every activity that occurs on National Forest System lands, both administratively and by the public. Access to National Forest lands is provided by an interconnected transportation system of Forest Service roads, county roads, and state highways. National Forests are charged with determining and maintaining a minimal road system needed for safe and efficient travel, and for administration, utilization, and protection of National Forest System lands.

On the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests (CONF), road maintenance budgets have steadily declined over the past decade, while traffic volumes have increased. This has resulted in roads not being maintained to the level prescribed in management objectives. Roads become candidates for decommissioning when maintenance needs and resource impacts outweigh access needs (USDA Forest Service 2004a). Road decommissioning ends motor vehicle use of roads no longer needed for resource management, and restores ecological processes interrupted or impacted by the road.

The same issues apply to National Forest trails: trails that are underutilized, difficult to maintain, and/or causing resource damage may become candidates for decommissioning or seasonal closure.

The CONF Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) (USDA Forest Service 2004) establishes the management direction for the forest and provides guidance for implementing project level decisions. The activities proposed in this environmental assessment implement direction in the Forest Plan and are a priority for accomplishing management objectives.

This project proposes to improve the condition of soils, water and aquatic habitat within the boundaries of the Conasauga Ranger District, by the decommissioning of two Forest Service system road segments, and two Forest Service system trails, and changing the use of two Forest Service system trails with seasonal closure periods.

Additional information may be found in the project record located at the Conasauga Ranger District office in Chatsworth, Georgia.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The purpose of this proposal is to decrease erosion on degraded roads and trails, and resulting sediment movement to streams in the sites proposed for decommissioning or seasonal closure. Sediment deposition into the adjacent streams is detrimental to aquatic habitats. These actions are needed because the road and trail segments identified are sustaining resource damage, are not essential for public or administrative access, and are no longer maintained or are difficult to maintain. The trails proposed for seasonal closure are being damaged by motorized travel during winter months when freezing and thawing conditions are present. Several other off-highway vehicle (OHV) trail systems on the CONF are currently being managed in a similar manner.

The roads proposed for decommissioning were identified in a Travel Analysis Process (TAP) conducted by the Conasauga Ranger District in 2012.

PROPOSED ACTION

The Forest Service proposes to decommission Patterson Creek Road (Forest Service Road (FSR)124), a portion of McClure Creek Road (FSR 796), Taylor Ridge Trail (Forest Development Trail (FDT)14), and a portion of Tibbs Trail (FDT 78). A trailhead to Tibbs Trail located on FSR 68 (Potato Patch Road) would also be decommissioned. Decommissioning is defined as actions resulting in permanent closure, i.e. restoring the area to a more natural condition, reestablishing more natural drainage patterns, stabilizing slopes, and restoring vegetation or ground cover.

In addition, the Forest Service proposes to seasonally close the Rock Creek OHV trail (FDT 175) and the Windy Gap Cycle Trail (FDT 154), which also accesses Tibbs Trail and the Milma Creek Trail (FDT 176). The closure period proposed is from January 1 until March 31. These trail segments would be closed to motorized use during the period using gate closures.

These actions are consistent with Forest Plan Goals 34 and 48 – “Trails (and roads) do not adversely affect soil and water resources”, and Goal 49 – “Close and restore unneeded roads and motorized trails” (Forest Plan pages 32, 44, and 45).

DECISION FRAMEWORK

Given the purpose and need, the Conasauga District Ranger, as the deciding official reviews the proposed action and the other alternatives in order to make the following decisions:

- Does the Environmental Assessment have sufficient site-specific environmental analysis?
- Will the proposed actions proceed as proposed, as modified by an alternative, or not at all?
- Does the proposed action or selected alternative meet the purpose and need for action?
- Is the selected alternative consistent with the Forest Plan, or shall the Forest Plan be amended in this action?
- Does the proposed action or selected alternative as analyzed, comply with the applicable standards and guidelines found in the Forest Plan and all laws governing Forest Service actions?

ISSUES AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions published on the Forest website in January 2014. A scoping letter describing the proposal was sent out to the district mailing list and nearby landowners, and was posted on the Forest website on February 3, 2014. *The Chatsworth Times* published the letter in its weekly newspaper during the scoping period. A total of fifteen responses were received as a result of public involvement effort. The comments and the Forest Service responses are included in Appendix B.

An Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) and the Responsible Official reviewed all public comments to identify issues for this proposal based on comments received. The IDT identified two key issues related to this proposal. These issues can be defined as:

- **Need for soil and water quality improvement:** There were several comments related to the need for arresting resource damage in the proposed project areas, and suggestions about what needed to

be done, especially in the Patterson Creek Road vicinity. The issue of negative effects to aquatic habitat in Patterson Creek, McClure Creek, and Holly Creek tributaries as a result of existing conditions was raised as well.

- **Loss of access:** Several respondents stated that the closure of Patterson Creek Road would prevent them from accessing National Forest in the Hell’s Hollow vicinity with four-wheel drive vehicles or OHVs. This activity has been popular for local residents for many years. Individuals stated that they would be unable to access areas that are important to them. Other people responded that closing Taylor Ridge Trail, a portion of Tibbs Trail, and seasonally closing the OHV trails would negatively affect their recreational uses of those areas.

Other comments offered by respondents include: 1) the need for the Forest Service to propose the closure of many more roads and trails due to similar conditions; 2) concerns about littering and resource damage on private land adjacent to National Forest; and 3) suggestions that the Forest Service place a gate on private land near Hell’s Hollow county road. These concerns are outside the scope of this proposal.

A notice regarding the availability of a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) describing the environmental consequences of the proposed action concerning the above referenced issues was prepared and disseminated to the district mailing list on June 23, 2014. This notice was also sent to several new individuals and/or groups which had commented on the February scoping letter. The notice included the website address for accessing the draft EA online, the physical address and email address for submitting comments, and the telephone number for obtaining information. The draft EA was published on the CONF website on June 23, 2014.

In addition, a legal notice requesting comments on the proposal was placed in *The Daily Citizen* (Dalton, Georgia), the newspaper of record for the Conasauga Ranger District, on June 24, 2014. A 30-day comment period for submitting comments began the day following this publication per 36 CFR 218.24(b)(6). The 30-day period ended on July 25, 2014.

Twenty individuals and/or groups submitted comments regarding the draft EA. Valuable input was received from private individuals, non-profit environmental organizations, and government agencies. The IDT and Responsible Official reviewed all the comments submitted. A table which documents each comment and the Forest Service’s response was prepared and is included as Appendix B in this Final EA. No new substantive issues were raised during the 30-day comment period; however there were several new comments pertaining to the above referenced issue titled “Limitation of Public Access”. Several respondents were concerned about the elimination of Patterson Creek Road (primarily) for hiking and equestrian use. The proposed action would effectively block motorized access to the roadbed; this would also make it difficult for hikers and equestrians to access the roadbed. An alternative to decommissioning FS 124 was not presented in the draft EA, therefore a new alternative was considered in this Final EA.

CHAPTER 2 – ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

ALTERNATIVE 1 – NO ACTION

Under this Alternative, the road and trail segments identified in this EA would be managed and operated within their current structures and conditions. No additional measures other than current regulations would be taken to protect resources. Existing erosion and sediment conditions would continue on the roads and trails described in

this EA. This alternative serves as a benchmark for other alternatives in order to analyze the effects on the environment from implementation of management activities.

ALTERNATIVE 2 - THE PROPOSED ACTION

Proposed treatment actions are described for the individual areas in this EA as follows:

1. Patterson Creek Road (FSR 124) is an open Forest Service system road connecting Tumbling Creek Road (FSR 22) and a Fannin County road (Hell's Hollow Road). The majority of the road is located in the Patterson Creek-Fightingtown Creek 6th level Hydrologic Unit (HUC #060200030206).

The road traverses approximately 1.5 miles of National Forest land and 0.7 miles of private land (Appendix A, Figure 1). FSR 124 crosses Tumbling Creek almost immediately upon leaving FSR 22. The channel is about 6-8 feet wide at this location. The stream crossing is a natural ford, lacking any engineered structure at the stream crossing. The road segment within the channel, and the segments in the adjacent floodplain are chronic sources of erosion from the streambanks and the channel, depositing sediments downstream, detrimental to both water quality and aquatic species habitat. After crossing Tumbling Creek, Patterson Creek Road ascends Tumbling Lead and then descends eastward into the Patterson Creek drainage (locally known as Hell's Hollow). The original construction period of the road is unknown, but likely predates National Forest designation and ownership. Current condition of the road bed, with respect to steep gradients, lack of proper drainage and absence of surfacing is evidence that the road was not built to modern standards and has not been maintained through its life to any accepted standard. The roadbed is continually eroding and almost impassible at times due to deep mud caused by four-wheel drive vehicles and lack of maintenance. Road conditions contribute to degrading soil productivity, water quality and aquatic habitat.

The entire road length (1.5 miles) on National Forest is proposed for decommissioning and obliteration. This would be accomplished by eliminating motorized access to the roadbed from FSR 22 (Tumbling Creek Road) and the National Forest boundary on the east end of the road (Hell's Hollow). These actions would require the use of equipment (trackhoe, bulldozer) to remove existing culverts, restore proper drainage by creating dips and out-sloping the roadbed; closing road access by creating earthen berms and placing boulders; and restoring ground cover with vegetation and/or mulch. Trees adjacent to the road prism may also be felled after completion of the equipment work described to block vehicular access and allow vegetation to become established and provide cover on disturbed soils.

Similar actions would be undertaken to close several adjoining old roadbeds that intersect FSR 124 in the Patterson Creek drainage. The origin of these roads is not known, but most were likely created during past timber harvest activities. The existing illegal use is primarily by OHV riders seeking additional motorized access for hunting or recreational purposes.

2. McClure Creek Road (FSR 796) is located at the end of Wehunt Road, a county road south of Georgia Highway 2 in Fannin County (Appendix A, Figure 2). The road is located in the McClure Creek-Fightingtown Creek watershed (6th level HUC #060200030204).

FSR 796 is a dead-end road with a total length of 3.5 miles. The road was constructed in 1990 to provide access for timber harvest and other forest activities. The segment of the road beyond the McClure Creek crossing is proposed for decommissioning. This 1.6 mile segment has not been adequately maintained, resulting in degraded surface conditions and improper drainage. Erosion is occurring along the road prism, contributing sediment to McClure Creek. Treatment proposed on this road segment would be similar to those on the Patterson Creek Road to achieve decommissioning.

3. Taylor Ridge Trail is a 2.7 mile long system foot trail, designated as hiker-only, that traverses the crest of Taylor Ridge in Walker County, Georgia (Appendix A, Figure 3). The trail is located in the Upper West Armuchee Creek watershed (6th level HUC #03150103501).

The existing trail does not provide a connection to other trails or facilities and parallels South Maddox Gap Road (FSR 217), a gated system road. Usage of the trail is very low, and primary use is hunting. Hunters can access the same area on foot via FSR 217, which is closed to motorized use year-round. Decommissioning of this trail would involve minimal ground disturbance because vegetation is already beginning to obliterate the trail tread. Removal of signs and restoration of three drainage dips would be the main treatment actions to achieve the desired condition.

4. Tibbs Trail is a designated system OHV trail located in the Emery Creek-Holly Creek watershed (6th level HUC #031501010401) (Appendix A, Figure 4).

The trail route was originally constructed as a Forest Service System Road (FSR 78) and named Tibbs Trail. The route is located on steep slope gradients and soils with severe erosion hazard. Proper road maintenance to maintain the road structure and drainage has been a challenge through its history. It was designated an OHV trail in the late 1980s, resulting in significant damage by OHVs. The former roadbed, now trail, is characterized by gullies and obstacles such as exposed rock ledges and boulders. The upper 1.5 mile segment of this trail is now nearly impassable, with more recent user-created trails bypassing this area. This segment is proposed for decommissioning. This would require equipment (e.g. bulldozer, trackhoe, farm tractor) to remove culverts, reshape the former roadbed to restore proper contours for drainage, and block access to the roadbed. Several user-created side trails intersect FDT 14, and would be blocked with similar methods. The upper trailhead, located at the intersection with FSR 68 (Potato Patch Road) would be decommissioned as well.

5. Rock Creek OHV trail and the Windy Gap/Milma Creek/Tibbs OHV trail networks are proposed for seasonal closure in order to decrease resource damage. Rock Creek OHV Trail is located in the Rock Creek watershed (6th level HUC #031501010405), Windy Gap in the Emery Creek-Holly Creek watershed (#03150101401), Milma Creek in the Mill Creek-Holly Creek watershed (#031501010402) and Tibbs Trail as described above (Appendix A, Figures 4 and 5).

Seasonal closures, proposed for January 1 through March 31, would be achieved on these trails through the installation of permanent gates placed at trail entrances. Other access control methods (barriers such as boulders, posts, fencing, or berm construction) could be used in conjunction with gate closures if necessary.

Each of the work areas would be blocked during implementation in order to protect forest users from heavy equipment and construction activities. Workers would be required to follow Forest Service and OSHA standards for safety.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT GIVEN DETAILED STUDY

CONVERSION OF ROADS TO TRAILS

This alternative would include items 3-5 as described above in the description of Alternative 2, but regarding items 1 and 2, Patterson Creek Road and a portion of McClure Creek Road would be proposed for conversion to National Forest System trails. This alternative action would address the two issues raised by the public during scoping (the need for soil and water improvement and the loss of access). It would also partially meet the purpose and need for action described on page one of this document.

However, the IDT identified several problems with the conversion of these roads to trails. The Forest has over 900 miles of system trails (motorized and non-motorized) at this time. This Forest-wide trail system has a constant need for maintenance, a limited budget for maintenance, and an ever-growing number of recreational users with interest in developing new trails. Although the Conasauga District and the Forest as a whole is supported by strong volunteer participation in trail maintenance, the development of new trails is not commonly undertaken due to this large existing trail system. The Forest has adopted criteria for new trail construction in order to prioritize the development of new trails, which will also need long-term maintenance (Appendix C). These three-tiered criteria includes the likelihood of sufficient funding for construction and maintenance costs, the likelihood that an organization would adopt the trail and be responsible for its maintenance for at least ten years, and many other criteria related to the sustainability of the new trail. The new trail should enhance the current trail system by tying into other trails, providing loop trails, etc. Public access to new trails should not be an issue. The application of these criteria to the McClure Creek Road and Patterson Creek Road reveal several potential issues:

- The segment of McClure Creek Road proposed for decommissioning is a 1.5 mile, dead-end road with no proximity to other system roads or trails. It would provide a very limited experience for users and would not enhance the existing trail system.
- Patterson Creek Road does not connect to other system trails or provide a loop trail for users, and its development as a trail is currently not feasible due to the location of the portion of the road across private land in Hell's Hollow. The current or future landowner could eliminate public access across their property by placing a gate on their land, and effectively eliminating access to National Forest. This has happened and is happening in many locations across the CONF at this time.

Therefore, this alternative (conversion of roads to trails) is not feasible at this time and was not given detailed study in this EA. Each of the areas proposed for treatment in this EA would be available for public access by foot travel after treatments are completed and rehabilitated.

CHAPTER 3 –ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

SOIL AND WATER RESOURCES/AQUATIC HABITATS

CURRENT CONDITION – The sites proposed for actions in this EA are located in six different 6th level Hydrologic Unit Code (HUC) watersheds on the Conasauga Ranger District. The area occupied by the roads or trails is a small percentage of the acreage within each watershed (Table 1).

The Forest Service completed a national Watershed Condition Classification (WCC) in 2011 of 6th level HUCs to evaluate existing watershed condition, the state of physical and biological characteristics and processes within a watershed that affect the hydrologic and soil functions supporting aquatic ecosystems. The evaluation described watershed conditions using analysis (primarily GIS data) for twelve categories, resulting in designation to one of three classes; Class 1, 2 or 3. Class 1 watersheds are termed “Functioning Properly”, Class 2 as “Functioning at Risk” and Class 3 as “Impaired Function”. The table displayed below identifies the 6th level HUCs for the project areas, acres in the HUC (private and National Forest) and the Watershed Condition Classification class determined in 2011.

Table 1 – Treatment Sites by 6th Level Hydrologic Unit

Treatment Site Name	Treatment Area ^{1/}	6 th Level Hydrologic Unit (HUC) Name & Number	HUC Total Acres	Acres of National Forest (% of Total HUC Acres)	Watershed Condition Classification Class
Patterson Creek Road (FSR 124)	1.5 miles 7.2 acres	Patterson Creek-Fightingtown Creek (060200030206)	19489	2204 (11%)	2
McClure Creek Road (FSR 796)	1.6 miles 7.7 acres	McClure Creek-Fightingtown Creek (060200030204)	13050	7566 (57%)	2
Taylor Ridge Trail (FDT 14)	2.7 miles 1.2 acres	Upper West Armuchee Creek (03150103501)	15848	5550 (35%)	2
Tibbs Trail (FDT 78)	1.5 miles 7.2 acres	Emery Creek-Holly Creek (031501010401)	13072	10256 (78%)	2
Rock Creek OHV Trail (FDT 175)	seasonal closure	Rock Creek (031501010405)	13781	6801 (49%)	2
Windy Gap Cycle Trail (FDT 154)	seasonal closure	Emery Creek-Holly Creek (03150101401)	13072	10256 (78%)	2
Milma Cycle Trail (FDT 176)	seasonal closure	Mill Creek-Holly Creek (031501010402)	12070	2414 (20%)	2

^{1/}Area disturbed = 4.8 acres/mile for roads, 0.48 acres/mile for trails

Areas naturally most susceptible to water quality problems are those where soil compaction is severe, slopes are steep, soil types are loamy versus sandy or clayey, and where rainfall events are typically prolonged and intense (Ouren et al. 2007), (Appendix D – Soils Specialist Report). The sites proposed for decommissioning are good examples of this characterization. Forest soils in the vicinity of the roads and trails proposed for closure (as well as much of the forest in general) have severe erosion hazard ratings due to their steep slopes and soil parent material and structure (various loam complexes) (USDA, NRCS 2014). OHVs and four-wheel-drive vehicles in areas with these characteristics can damage vegetation, soils, water quality, and aquatic habitat in a very short amount of time.

Weather in the mountains of north Georgia is an important factor influencing soil and water quality conditions on unpaved roads and trails. A measurable amount of rain falls on about 120 days each year totaling

about 60 inches per year, and freezing temperatures are expected on 50 to 70 days per year (National Weather Service 2014). Motorized use of unpaved roads and trails following heavy rains and when soils are frequently freezing and thawing can adversely affect soils and vegetation very quickly. Each of the roads and trails proposed for decommissioning or seasonal closure are currently open year-round, in all weather conditions.

The roads proposed for decommissioning (Patterson Creek Road and a portion of McClure Creek Road) generally lack gravel surfacing, resulting in exposed soils within the road prism. The roadbeds are compacted and eroding, with significant rutting for long distances and a general lack of proper surface drainage structures. User-created side roads with similar or worse conditions are present as well. Poor surface drainage and lack of a “crowned” roadbed condition has created a water conduit that channels and directs water flow containing sediments and contaminants to nearby streams or waterways. Continuing erosion and a lack of maintenance has caused berms to form along the road shoulders, resulting in entrenched road beds below the natural ground surface. These berms create depressions and gullies within the roadbed because runoff cannot escape from the road surface. Collected runoff from the roads eventually washes into the stream crossings, carrying sediment and fine materials into streams.

Hydrologic connectivity is a factor in reducing sediment movement from erosion sources to streams. Hydrologic connectivity occurs when storm water runoff from a road or trail enters a stream channel having perennial, intermittent, or ephemeral flow. Wherever a hydrologic connection exists, rapid runoff, sediments, and road associated chemicals (for example, spills, oils) generated on the road surface and cut slopes are provided a direct route into the streams (Forest Service, USDA 1999). The best situation is for roads and trails to NOT be hydrologically connected to streams. Most of the road segments proposed for treatment are at distances more than 25 feet from streams, however road crossings of streams are direct connections to the stream channels, and without effective BMPs in place contribute sediment.

Sediment has a detrimental effect on fish and other aquatic life by embedding or smothering habitat and interfering with feeding and reproduction due to high turbidity. Fish diversity in Tumbling Creek is lower than predicted, most likely due to the effect of sediments from unpaved roads in the watershed (Georgia Department of Natural Resources data and Georgia 303(d) list – streams not supporting designated uses). Tumbling Creek was initially listed in 2010 based on sampling of fish diversity, and remains listed as of 2014. Improving water quality in this stream is vital to the continued existence of a population of the rare eastern hellbender salamander (*Cryptobranchus allegheniensis*), in addition to all the other native fish and invertebrates and a population of rainbow trout (*Salmo gairdneri*). Patterson Creek and McClure Creek’s aquatic species health is also at risk due to similar road conditions.

A similar situation exists on Tibbs Trail (a former system road converted into an OHV trail). Erosional forces have continuously been exerted until significant amounts of bare rock are exposed. Sedimentation to streams is less severe because the trail is located high in the Holly Creek drainage and crosses only ephemeral drainages.

Vegetation and soils in the trail tread on the Rock Creek and Windy Gap OHV trail networks are damaged by OHVs during the winter and early spring months when conditions are freezing and thawing. This has made trail maintenance more difficult and costly, and is a source of sedimentation to streams.

Soil conditions on Taylor Ridge Trail are stable due to its ridge-top position, vegetated tread, and non-motorized designation.

EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVE 1 - NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

Direct and Indirect Effects

There would be no direct effects of this alternative on soil and water resources because no action would take place. Indirect effects of this alternative would be that the current conditions described above would continue. Specifically, these effects would be a continuation of chronic sedimentation from the existing roads and trails to streams in the areas, and the potential for continued adverse effects to aquatic habitats. It would not meet the purpose and need for the proposal. Alternative A would not meet the Forest Plan goals of trails (Goal 34) and roads (Goal 48) not adversely affecting soil and water resources.

Cumulative Effects

There are no actions proposed under Alternative 1, which when combined with effects of past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future activities planned on these roads or trails which would result in adverse cumulative effects to soil and water resources.

EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVE 2 – THE PROPOSED ACTION

Direct and Indirect Effects

The actions required to decommission FSR 124, a portion of FSR 796, and the upper segment of Tibbs Trail would have localized, short-term direct effects to soils and water quality as equipment reshapes the roadbed for proper drainage, removes culverts, restores damaged stream banks, and prepares the disturbed areas for seeding and mulching to re-establish ground cover. Short-term movement of soil from the disturbed areas is anticipated with the potential for turbidity, an indirect effect to water quality in the project areas.

Road and trail segments proposed for decommissioning treatments cover a total of approximately 23 acres across all sites (based on a 4.8 acres per mile conversion factor for system roads and 0.48 acres per mile for system trails, see Table 1 above). Soil loss rates for existing permanent roads, open continuously, is estimated at 9.9 tons/acre/year in the Blue Ridge physiographic area (a loss of 10 tons/acre would be 1/16th inch over an entire acre) (Forest Plan analysis records, 1982). This soil loss and associated sediment yield (movement of eroded soil material from a source to a stream) would be expected to decline with the proposed actions. The implementation of best management practices, e.g. proper drainage, ground cover on disturbed soils, control of sediment runoff, is expected to result in a decline of sediments within the first six months. Decline in sediment will continue over the next 6 months to 1 year as disturbed soils are fully vegetated, vehicle access is controlled, and overland flow from the area carries less sediment.

These actions would be performed in accordance with Forest Plan standards, including standard 11-040 (all...decommissioning of Forest Service System Roads will comply with requirements of Section 404 of the Clean Water Act...including the fifteen (15) mandatory Best Management Practices (40 CFR 232.22)) and the Manual for Erosion and Sediment Control in Georgia, current Georgia Rules and Regulations for Water Quality Control for all projects to meet water quality objectives (Georgia Soil and Water Commission, Sixth Edition, 2014). This direction would include stabilizing all disturbed soils with straw mulch, the placement of erosion control devices such as silt fence or hay bales, the requirement for temporary or permanent vegetation within 14 days, and the recommended spacing for water diversion structures depend-

ing on grade. After completion of the closure actions, the project would have an overall positive direct effect on soil and water resources and associated aquatic habitat.

The actions required to seasonally close the ORV trails would have no direct effect on soil and water resources because actions would be extremely limited: gates would be installed, and possibly boulders, posts, or fencing installed or berms constructed. The indirect effects of the seasonal closure would be positive due to the removal of motorized traffic on the trails during the season of freeze/thaw conditions and early spring rains.

The actions to decommission Taylor Ridge Trail and the upper Tibbs Trailhead would have little or no direct or indirect effect on soils, water quality, or aquatic habitat.

Cumulative Effects

Past actions in the project areas include periodic maintenance of the Rock Creek and Windy Gap/Milma Creek/Tibbs OHV trails to re-establish drainage dips and ditches (the upper portion of Tibbs Trail was not maintained because it was inaccessible to the trail machine). This maintenance was last performed during fall 2011 and early December 2013. This type of maintenance disturbs the ground in localized areas, but is important in minimizing erosion and sedimentation overall.

There are no other recent past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future actions planned in these areas which could combine with the proposed action and create detrimental cumulative effects.

MOTORIZED ACCESS

CURRENT CONDITION - There are approximately 1,350 miles of Forest Service roads on the Chattahoochee National Forest, half of which is maintained for passenger car use. The remaining half is maintained for high-clearance vehicles or is closed to vehicle traffic (USDA Forest Service 2004a). Road maintenance budgets have steadily fallen in the past 10 years, while recreational traffic has risen. This traffic increases the maintenance work necessary to keep the roads in a safe and sustainable condition. The Forest is at the point where, as stated above in the Purpose and Need section of this document, “roads become candidates for decommissioning when maintenance needs and resource impacts outweigh access needs.”

Some individuals and user groups which use the roads and trails proposed for decommissioning and/or seasonal closure for recreational purposes or to access certain areas of the National Forest expressed opinions about the limitation of that access. Both positive and negative opinions were expressed. Each of the areas proposed for a change in access is currently open year-round.

- FSR 124 – Several respondents felt strongly that the closure of FSR 124 to motorized vehicles would negatively affect their ability to use the area. Although a significant percentage of this road is located on private property, the road has been open to public use for over 80 years, possibly much longer. Fannin County does not claim the road as under its jurisdiction. The Forest Service recently contacted the Fannin County road superintendent to inquire as to the county’s interest in assuming responsibility for jurisdiction and maintenance of FSR 124; no response has been received to date.

The eastern 0.7 mile of FSR 124 is located on private property adjacent to National Forest. The road condition is even more degraded on this property than most of that located on National Forest. The property is not currently signed with “no trespassing” signs which would make it necessary for other individuals to carry letters of permission to legally utilize the property (personal communication, Forest Service law enforcement personnel). Operators of OHVs (both off-road motorcycles and four-wheelers) and high-clearance, four-wheel-drive vehicles routinely travel to this property or through it to access National Forest. Use of four-wheelers on Forest Service system roads such as FSR 124 is cur-

rently illegal; only designated OHV routes may be utilized by four-wheelers (page 2-33, Forest Service 2004).

Hunters can access National Forest in the vicinity of Mule Top, Tumbling Lead, and Turkeypen Ridge via the road. Users of FSR 124 can currently drive to Tumbling Creek Road (FSR 22) from Hell's Hollow Road and access the Cohutta Wildlife Management Area in less than 30 minutes.

There were also comments indicating that the closure of access to this area would be welcomed by some forest users or local residents, due to littering, resource damage and a potential increase in solitude.

- FSR 796 – The segment of McClure Creek road proposed for decommissioning is a dead-end road located at the end of Wehunt Road. Users can access a dispersed campsite and National Forest in the vicinity of Porter Mountain from this end of the road.
- FDT 78 – The upper segment of Tibbs Trail is currently open to OHVs and can be accessed year-round from the Windy Gap/Milma Creek Trails and seasonally from Potato Patch Road (FSR 68). (FSR 68 is gated during the winter months, usually January – March). In its current condition, OHVs can only utilize a portion of the trail without winching their vehicles over a large rock ledge, resulting in user-created trails bypassing this area. Most users turn around before that point, therefore access to the upper trailhead is very difficult. Occasional ORV riders are seen driving on Potato Patch Road during the winter months when the road is closed for the season, and it can be assumed they are accessing it from Tibbs Trail or Windy Gap Cycle Trail.

Tibbs Trail is within the Cohutta Wildlife Management Area, and provides hunter access to National Forest in the Holly Creek drainage.

- FDT 14 - Taylor Ridge Trail can be accessed by hikers from the south via the Smith Gap-A Road (FSR 635A) and South Maddox Gap Road (FSR 217) from the north. It provides hiker access to a 2.2 mile stretch of Taylor Ridge, year-round. Hunters are the primary users of the trail.
- Seasonal closure of FDT 175 – Rock Creek OHV trail is accessed from Peeples Lake Road (FSR 3). It provides access to Tatum Lead Road and a small portion of the Rock Creek drainage. Foot travel would still be available during the winter months.
- Seasonal closure of FDT 154 - Windy Gap Cycle Trail is accessed from Muskrat Road (FSR 218). It also provides access to the Milma Creek and Tibbs OHV trails. Motorcycles only are supposed to ride the Windy Gap Trail after the Milma Creek Trail splits off. These are popular trails that provide visitors (including hunters and anglers) motorized access to a fairly large area in the Holly Creek drainage (within the Cohutta Wildlife Management Area). Foot travel would still be available during the winter months.

EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVE 1 - NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

Direct and Indirect Effects

There would be no direct or indirect effects of this alternative on motorized access to the various sites because no action would take place.

Cumulative Effects

There are no actions proposed under Alternative 1, which when combined with effects of past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future activities planned on these roads or trails which would result in adverse cumulative effects on motorized access to these areas.

EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVE 2 – THE PROPOSED ACTION

Direct and Indirect Effects

The direct effect of decommissioning FSR 124 and a portion of FSR 796 on the quality of the human environment would be a reduction in motorized access to some small sections of National Forest. Hunters retrieving big game may be affected. Areas such as Mule Top, Tumbling Lead, Turkeypen Ridge, and Porter Mountain would be further from roads; however, there is alternative access from other roads. Porter Mountain is accessible from Hickory Nut Road (FSR 797) and Cashes Valley Road (county road). Mule Top, Turkeypen Ridge, and Tumbling Lead are accessible on foot from Tumbling Creek Road and Sholey Creek-A (FSR 22A).

Forest users that live in the Hell's Hollow vicinity would experience additional travel time to get to Tumbling Creek Road (approximately 14 additional miles).

Closure of the roads would increase the satisfaction of visitors that prefer solitude and fewer disturbances, as well as those that consider the protection of natural ecosystems paramount to other concerns. The area would still be accessible on foot (if private property can be traversed).

The closure of FDT 14 would have little effect on the human environment or limitations on recreational non-motorized access. Forest visitors could still access the area on Taylor Ridge on foot or on FSR 217.

The closure and decommissioning of the upper portion of FDT 78 and its upper trailhead on FSR 68 would have a minor direct effect on recreational users. Most users are unable to travel the trail in its current condition, but for those that have chosen to do so in the past, this area would be inaccessible to them by motorized vehicle. As with the roads discussed above, hunters retrieving big game may be affected for a few days each year.

The seasonal closure of FDT 154 and 175 would directly affect users that would normally utilize those trail systems during the winter and early spring months. They would experience a reduction in motorized access to those areas of National Forest for a portion of each year. Seasonal closure of these trail systems would make their management compatible with that of other OHV trails on the forest.

Cumulative Effects

There are no other recent past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future Federal actions planned in these areas which could combine with the proposed action and create cumulative effects. However, it is possible and reasonably foreseeable that motorized access to eastern end of FSR 124 could be eliminated if a current or future private property owner erects a gate blocking access to the road on their property.

OTHER DISCLOSURES

THREATENED, ENDANGERED, SENSITIVE, AND LOCALLY RARE SPECIES (TES/LR)

CURRENT CONDITION – Section 7(a)(2) of the Endangered Species Act directs all Federal agencies to insure that any action they authorize, fund, or carry-out does not jeopardize the continued existence of an endangered or threatened species or designated or proposed critical habitat (collectively, referred to as protected resources) (50 CFR 402). The project areas have been analyzed regarding potential effects to rare terrestrial or aquatic species, including plants. The effect of the proposed action on the following species was assessed in a Biological Evaluation, which is part of the project record at the Conasauga Ranger District:

- Eastern hellbenders (*Cryptobranchus alleganiensis alleganiensis*) are large salamanders that live in streams within the Tennessee River drainage in Georgia (as well as other eastern states, mostly in the Appalachian Mountains). They are fully aquatic salamanders that live in medium- to large-sized streams with cold, clear water and a rocky bottom, usually in water about 11-23 inches deep (Humphries 2008). Hellbender populations have drastically declined or disappeared in many areas. The species is listed as Threatened in Georgia, and a petition for federal listing as Endangered or Threatened has been made to the US Fish and Wildlife Service (Center for Biological Diversity 2010). The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests have listed the eastern hellbender as Locally Rare. A population of eastern hellbenders is known to exist in both Tumbling Creek and Fightingtown Creek (Humphries 2005), but not in Patterson Creek or McClure Creek (headwater tributaries to Fightingtown Creek). The presence of hellbenders is most positively correlated with the presence of boulders, and is most negatively correlated with the amount of sand/silt (sediment) in a stream. Sediment embeds the spaces beneath boulders and eliminates space for reproducing hellbenders (as well as trout and other aquatic species).
- Several rare species of tree-roosting bats could potentially utilize loose bark or crevices in trees which might be removed during the implementation of the decommissioning actions. The endangered Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis*), the northern long-eared bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*) which is proposed for federal listing as endangered, and/or the Rafinesque's big-eared bat (*Corynorhinus rafinesquii*) could potentially utilize trees in the project areas as summer roost or maternity roost trees.
- Upper Tibbs Trail (proposed for decommissioning) and the Windy Gap/Milma Creek ORV Trails proposed for seasonal closure are located in the Holly Creek drainage. Rare fish and mussels occur in the mainstem of Holly Creek, including the federally listed blue shiner (*Cyprinella caerulea*) and five federally listed mussel species, the fine-lined pocketbook (*Hamiota altilis*), Coosa moccasinshell (*Medionidus parvulus*), Alabama moccasinshell (*Medionidus acutissimus*), rayed kidneyshell (*Ptychobranchus foremanianus*), and southern pigtoe (*Pleurobema georgianum*). Several miles of lower Holly Creek have been designated as Critical Habitat for these rare mussel species. Lined chub (*Hybopsis lineapunctata*), Alabama rainbow (*Villosa nebulosa*) and Alabama creekmussel (*Strophitus connasaugensis*) (Sensitive aquatic species) exist as well.

These rare aquatics occur in lower Holly Creek, several miles downstream of the Dill Creek-Holly Creek confluence. None of these species occur on National Forest, or in the Dill Creek or Emery Creek watersheds, where project activities are proposed.

EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVE 1 - NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

Direct and Indirect Effects

There would be no direct effects of this alternative on the eastern hellbender, rare bats, or rare aquatic species because no action would take place. Indirect effects of this alternative would be that the current conditions would continue, including chronic sedimentation from the existing roads and trails to streams in the areas, and the potential for continued adverse effects to aquatic habitats. Eastern hellbender habitats downstream in Tumbling Creek, and rare fish and mussels downstream in Holly Creek could be negatively affected if sedimentation continues or worsens.

Cumulative Effects

There are no actions proposed under Alternative 1, which when combined with effects of past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future activities planned on these roads or trails which would result in adverse cumulative effects to threatened, endangered, sensitive, or locally rare species.

EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVE 2 – THE PROPOSED ACTION

Direct and Indirect Effects

The actions associated with decommissioning of the portion of FSR 124 as it crosses Tumbling Creek were assessed for potential effects to hellbenders. That portion of the stream is too shallow and lacks the large boulders essential to hellbenders. It is several miles upstream of the portion occupied by hellbenders. The decommissioning actions would have little or no impacts to the species due to the stream protective measures required by the Forest Plan as well as the Georgia Rules and Regulations for Water Quality. Any minor inputs of sediment to Tumbling Creek would be short-term, and after completion of the closure actions, the project would have an overall positive effect on water quality and associated aquatic habitat.

There are no known occurrences of any of the rare bat species in the project areas and the potential for this use is almost discountable. Few trees would be affected, and these would be assessed by a wildlife biologist for potential use as summer roosts prior to cutting, if the actions occur during the months when bats may be present.

The decommissioning of upper Tibbs Trail and seasonal closure of Windy Gap/Milma Creek/Tibbs Trail ORV Trails was analyzed regarding the potential effects to the Holly Creek aquatic species. Decommissioning actions on upper Tibbs Trail and Trailhead would not affect blue shiner, the rare mussel species, or any other rare aquatic species in Holly Creek because these actions would have little or no impact due to the stream protective measures required by the Forest Plan as well as the Georgia Rules and Regulations for Water Quality. Any minor inputs of sediment to Dill Creek, Milma Creek, or Emery Creek (Holly Creek headwater tributaries) would be small and short-term, and after completion of the closure actions, the project would have an overall positive effect on water quality and associated aquatic habitat.

The Biological Evaluation completed for this project includes a determination that this alternative is ‘not likely to adversely affect’ the blue shiner, federally-listed mussels, or Indiana bat; ‘not likely to jeopardize the existence of the northern long-eared bat’; and a determination that the project is not likely to impact Rafinesque’s big-eared bat, Sensitive aquatic species in Holly Creek, or eastern hellbender.

Cumulative Effects

Past actions in the project areas include periodic maintenance of the Rock Creek and Windy Gap/Milma Creek/Tibbs OHV trails to re-establish drainage dips and ditches (the upper portion of Tibbs Trail was not

maintained because it was inaccessible to the trail machine). This maintenance was last performed during fall 2011 and early December 2013. This type of maintenance disturbs the ground in localized areas, but is important in minimizing erosion and sedimentation overall.

There are no other recent past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future actions planned in these areas which could combine with the proposed action and create detrimental cumulative effects to threatened, endangered, sensitive, or locally rare species.

CULTURAL RESOURCES

The effect of the project on cultural resources was assessed, and because the proposed action is limited to roads and trails, there is no anticipated effect to archeological resources or Native American resources. A cultural resources clearance document is located in the project record at the Conasauga Ranger District. This project complies with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

IRREVERSIBLE OR IRRETRIEVABLE COMMITMENT OF RESOURCES

There would be no irretrievable commitment of resources as a result of this proposed action.

CHAPTER 4 –CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

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APPENDIX A - MAPS

Figure 1. Patterson Creek Road vicinity map.

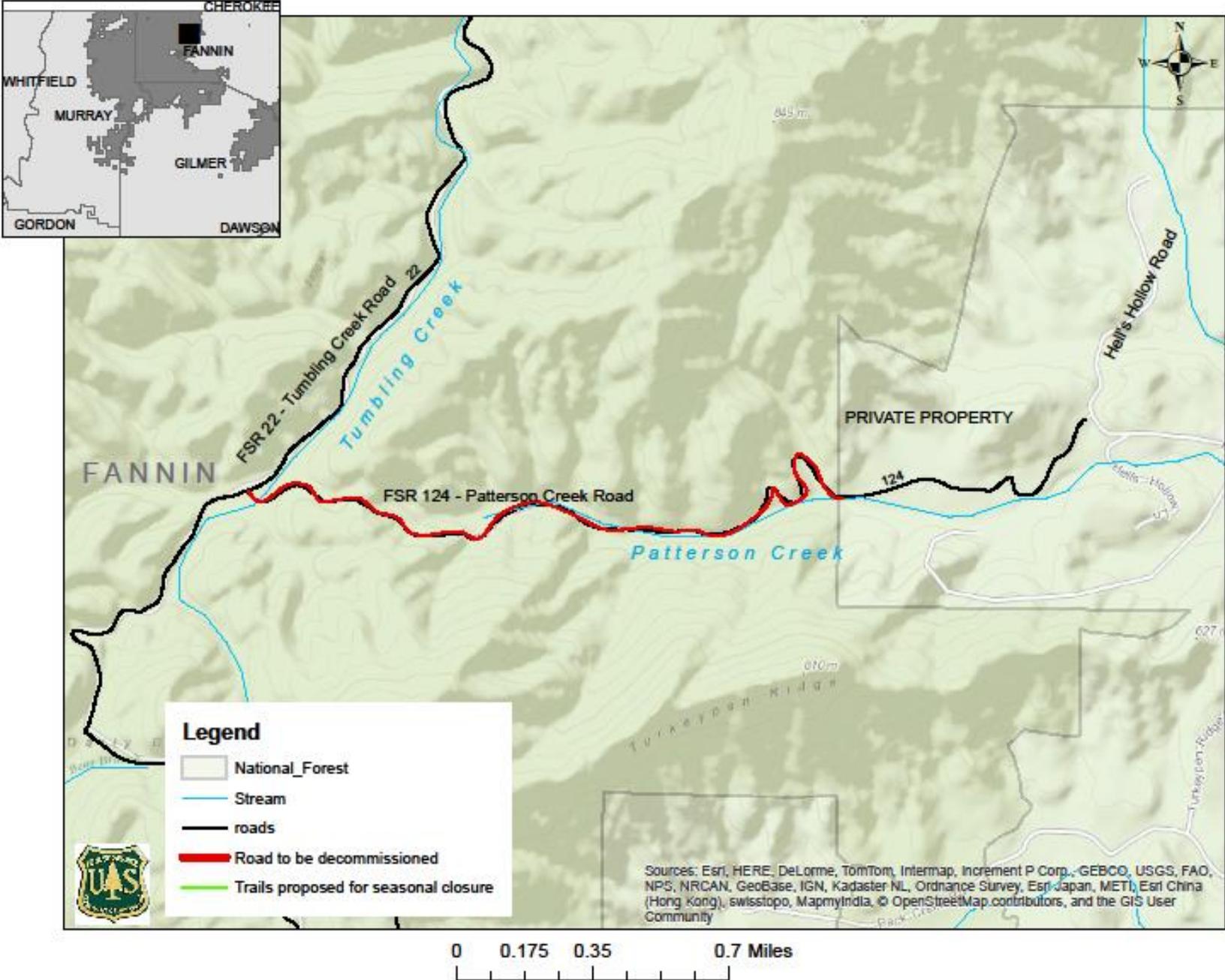


Figure 2. McClure Creek Road vicinity map.

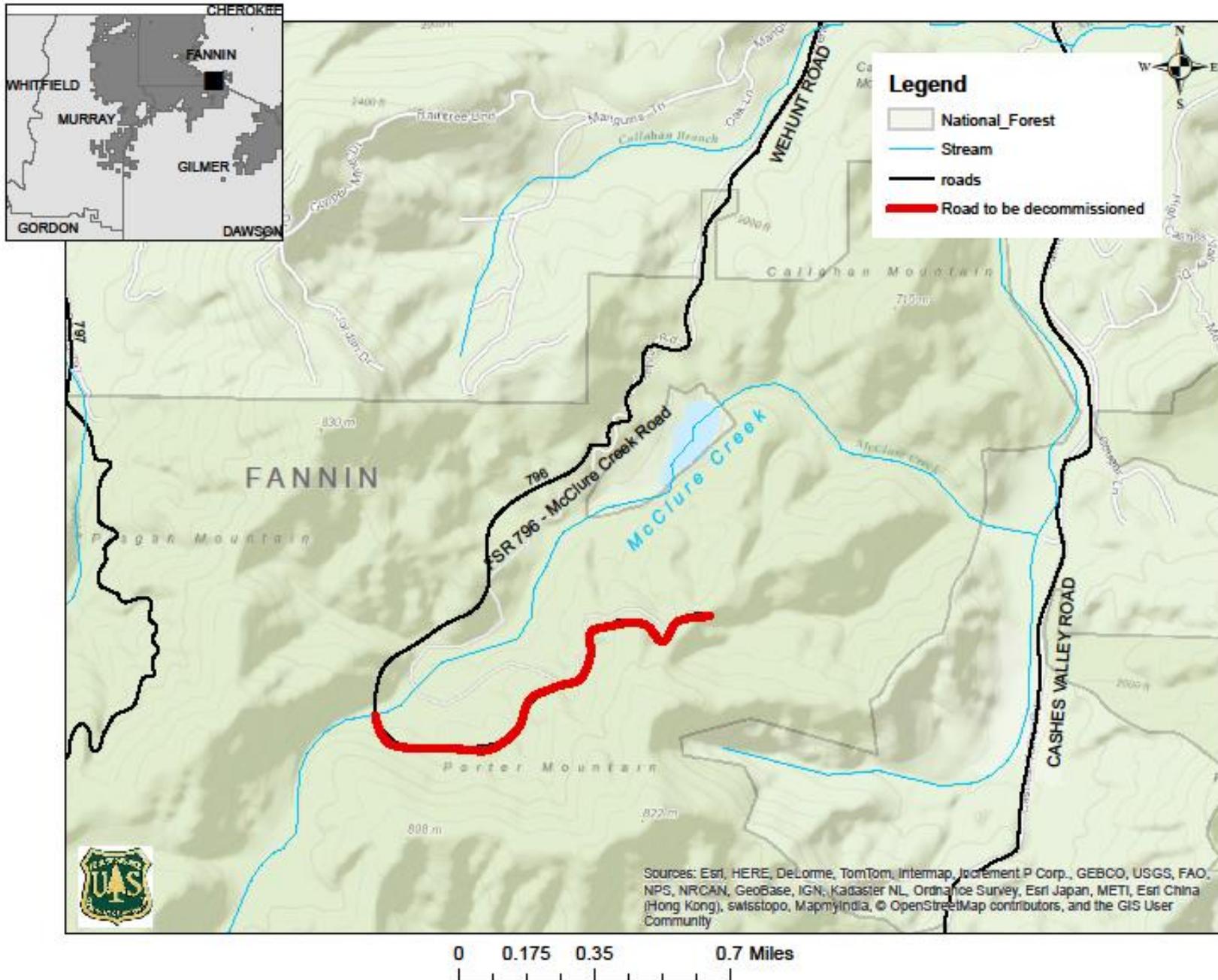


Figure 3. Taylor Ridge Trail vicinity map.

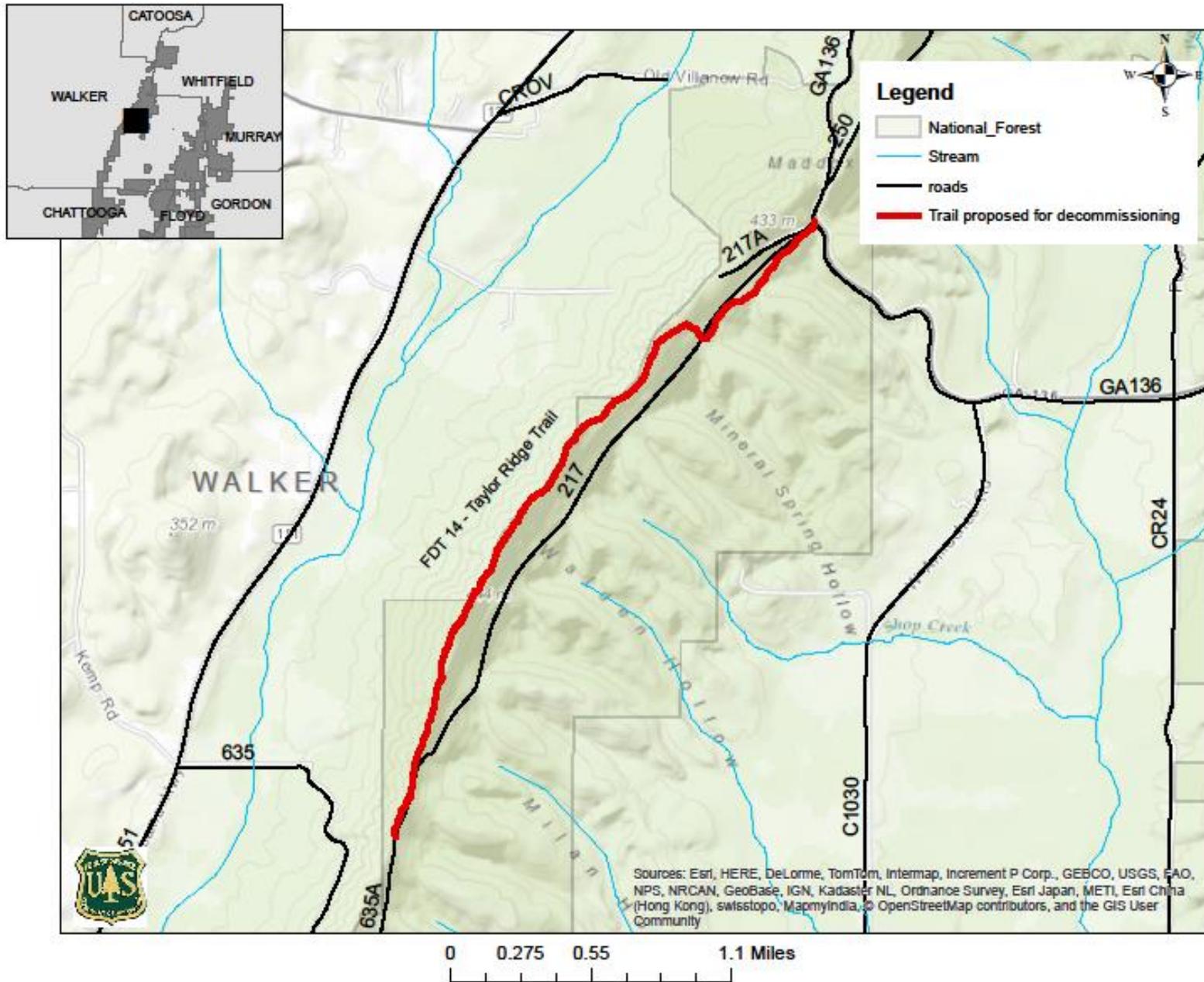


Figure 4. Tibbs Trail and Windy Gap Cycle Trail vicinity map.

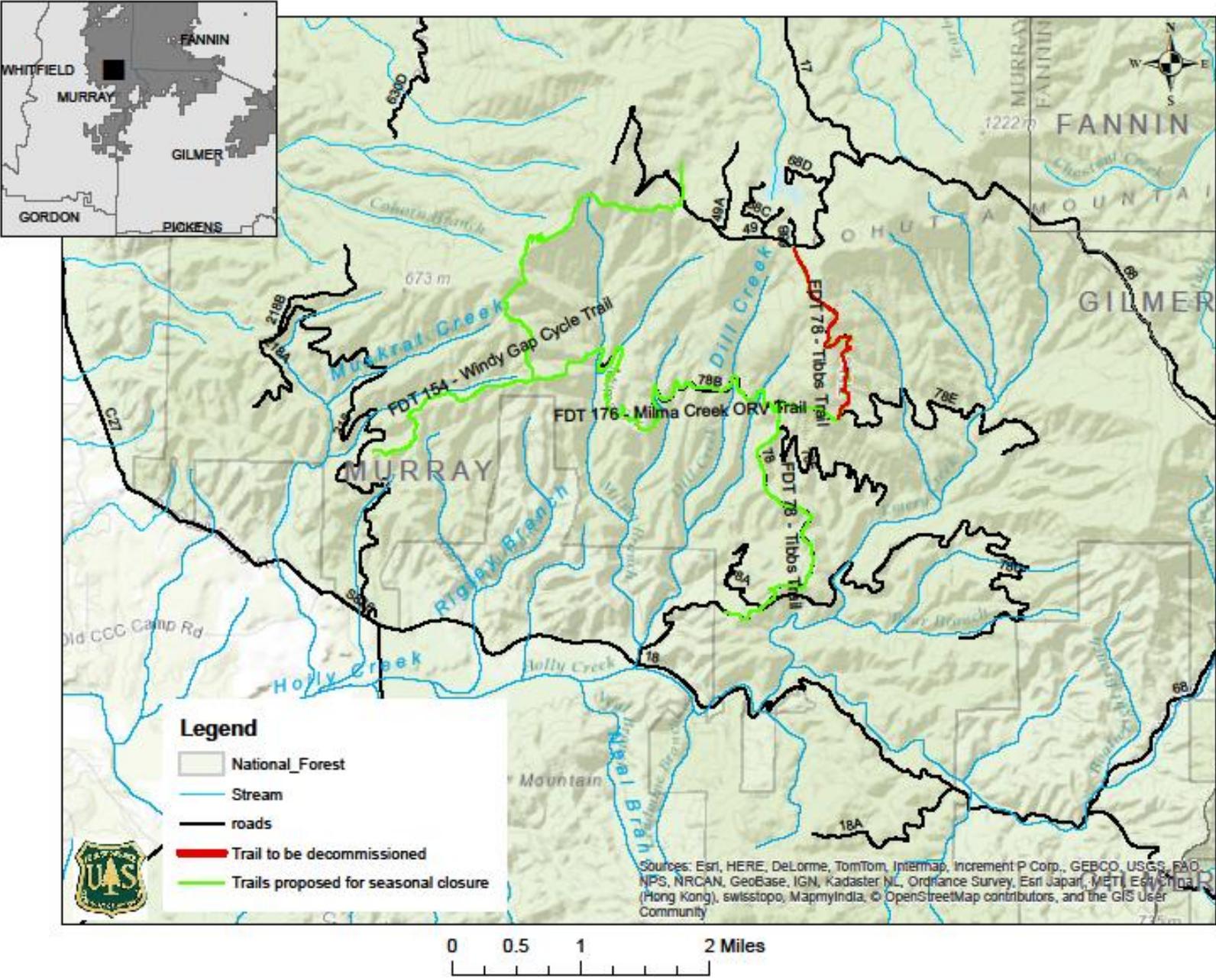
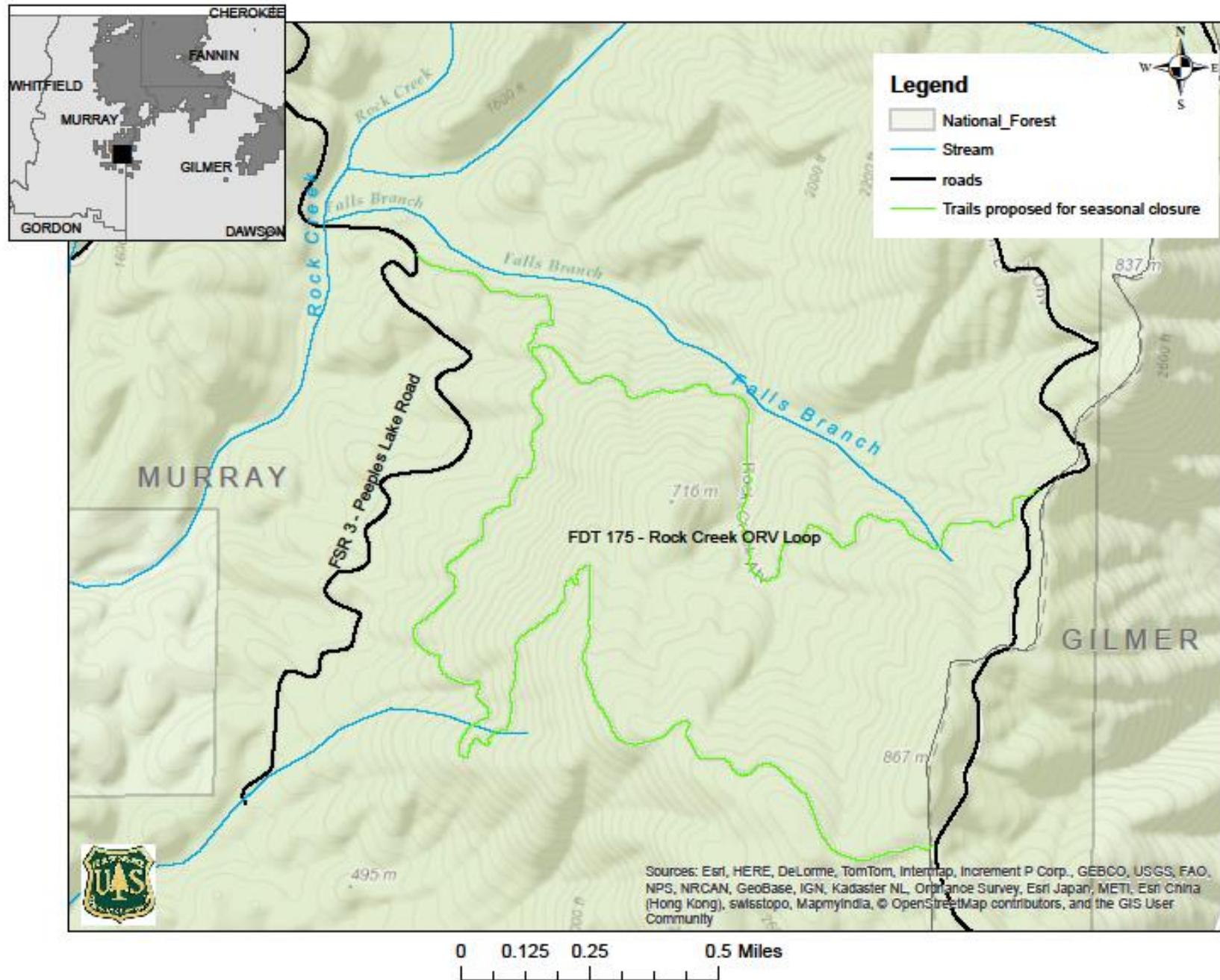


Figure 5. Rock Creek OHV Trail vicinity map.



APPENDIX B

RESPONSE TO COMMENTS

Content Analysis of Comments

**Road/Trail Decommissioning Project and Seasonal Closure Project
Conasauga Ranger District, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests
Public Comments**

Table 1. Comments received during scoping period.

Comment	Commenter	Date	Comment/Issue	Response
1	Pulliam Locke, Teresa	2/21/2014 and 2/28/2014	-Patterson Creek Road is part of family and local history and used for access to other parts of National Forest -Do not close Patterson Creek Road	Comment noted.
2	Pulliam, Linda	2/18/2014	-Do not close Patterson Creek Road	Comment noted.
3	O'Neal, Steve	2/24/2014	-Do not want to see Patterson Creek Road closed, travel it quite a bit	Comment noted.
4	Topa, Mary A. Georgia Forest-Watch	2/26/2014	-Patterson Creek Road is a source of sediment being deposited into both Tumbling and Patterson Creek. -Closure and obliteration will reduce sedimentation and improve water quality and aquatic species' habitat -support proposal to close McClure Creek Road (prefer entire road closed) -illegal ATV use on McClure Creek Road will continue without closing entire road -proposed section of McClure Creek Road to remain open has an illegal ATV trail at the proposed end -at the very least, road should be permanently gated -supports closing proposed segment of Tibbs Trail (however, questions why entire trail is not closed)	Comment noted.

			-supports seasonal closure of Windy Gap and Rock Creek ORV trails -Recommend that Forest Service close Devils Den Road (FSR 792)	
5	Tippens, Roger	2/25/2014	-supports proposed closures -interested in other ORV trails open in winter	Comment noted.
6	Pulliam, Vicky	2/26/2014	-Please do not close Patterson Creek Rd!!!	Comment noted.
7	Charron, Terri	2/26/2014	-Close Patterson Creek Road to motor vehicles (4-wheelers and trucks), but leave open to foot or horse traffic -Littering is out of control as a result of so much access	Hikers and equestrians are free to travel cross-country throughout the CONF.
8	Graham, Cody	2/27/2014	Do not close Patterson Creek and McClure Creek Rd, and Tibbs and Rock Creek Trails (used for enjoyment)	Comment noted.
9	Forster, Dan (Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Resources Division)	2/26/2014	-Roads and trails provide access for hunters, anglers, and other outdoor recreationists, and also facilitate habitat improvement projects and prompt emergency response activities -Proposed action does not consider resource damage problems (Patterson Creek Road) currently outside the boundaries of the National Forest -Support repair of resource damage from roads/trails by means other than decommissioning- such as, stream crossings on FSR 124, repair existing erosion/sedimentation issues, bottomless arch culverts and periodic road maintenance -Recommend road maintenance of McClure Creek Road to correct resource damage issues, and/or implementing seasonal restrictions or designating as administrative use	See EA, pages 11-12 regarding the effects of reducing motorized access. The Forest Service does not propose actions on private lands outside the boundaries of National Forests. See EA, page 1 regarding the purpose and need for decommissioning and/or seasonal closure.

			<p>only as alternative to de-commissioning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Recommend leaving Tibbs Trail “as is” although repairing this road will be very costly and may/may not successfully address damage to soil resources -Support decommissioning of FDT 14 (Taylors Ridge Trail) --DNR does not support closure of ORV trails (Rock Creek and Windy Gap); no specific justification for seasonal closure of these trails (Rock Creek and Windy Gap) -If seasonal closure is implemented, closure dates should coincide with other closure dates on Cohutta WMA 	<p>Seasonal closure dates would pertain to the season of freezing and thawing conditions; this mirrors the timing of the seasonal closure of several roads on the Cohutta WMA due to problems with freezing and thawing conditions.</p>
10	Croy, Phillip	2/28/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Close Patterson Creek Road to 4 wheel drive vehicles and keep open for dual sport motorcycles, hikers, horses, and bicyclists -volunteer interested in maintaining if remains open to motorcycles 	<p>Hikers and equestrians are free to travel cross-country throughout the CONF, but the use of the area by motorized vehicles would necessitate that the road be designated as system trail or remain a system road. This does not fully meet the purpose and need for action described in Chapter 1 of the EA.</p>
11	Holsomback, Rick	2/18/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Object to closure of upper Tibbs Trail and seasonal closing of Windy Gap and Rock Creek Trails 	<p>Comment noted.</p>
12	Shuler, Roger	2/27/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Supports closure of Patterson Creek and McClure Creek Roads 	<p>Comment noted.</p>
13	Barnes, Brenda	2/18/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Opposes closure of Patterson Creek and McClure Creek Roads 	<p>Comment noted.</p>
14	Chitwood, Barnett	2/6/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Question as to whether de-commission of Taylors Ridge 	<p>Hikers and equestrians are free to travel cross-</p>

			Trail will limit access for hunters/hikers -General question on the legality of cross-country foot travel	country throughout the CONF.
15	Bond, Diane	2/10/2014	Supports the closures because of littering, campfires, and uncontrollable use (4 wheeler and 4 wheel drives)	Comment noted.

Table 2. Comments received during 30-day comment period

1	Finnicum, Brian K (The News Observer)	7/24/2014	-Request that comment period be extended	Based upon 36 CFR 218.25(a), "the time period for the opportunity to comment on a proposed project or activity to be documented with an environmental assessment shall not be extended".
2	Kraemer, Debbe	7/24/2014 and 7/21/2014	-Request FS to reconsider proposal, enjoys riding horses on Patterson Cr. Road -access to Cohutta Wilderness -does not want to see Wehunt (McClure Creek Road) closed to horse use -interest in maintaining trails/use as member of BCHNG	Although hikers and equestrians are free to travel cross-country throughout the CONF, the proposed action (blocking access to the roadbeds to motorized vehicles) would make it difficult for equestrians to access the former roadbeds. A conversion of the roads to trails is an alternative which was not considered in the draft Environmental Assessment, because it does not fully meet the purpose and need for action. The Final EA addresses this issue as an alternative to the proposed action (EA page 6), not given detailed study.
3	Meeks, Tracy	7/23/2014	-What are the minimum required policies for advertising Forest Service changes?	The Forest Service complies with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements for public involvement. Per 40 CFR 1501.7,

				<p>“There shall be an early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed and for identifying the significant issues related to a proposed action. This process shall be termed scoping.” The Forest Service prepares and disseminates “scoping” letters for every project with potential environmental impacts to a list of interested groups and individuals. This mailing list is comprised of groups or individuals who have requested to be kept apprised of National Forest projects, in addition to individuals potentially affected by a specific project, such as an adjacent property owner.</p>
4	Fillingham, Martha	7/23/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Access for equestrians, hikers, and hunters -Gate, close road to motorized traffic but leave open to horses, hikers (Patterson Creek and McClure Creek Rds) -So few horse “trails” on east side of Cohuttas -volunteer interested in maintaining these “trails” 	See response to comment number 2.
5	Touryniere, Carolyn	7/23/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Supports proposal submitted by Kathleen Corcoran -interest in maintaining trails/use as member of BCHNG 	See response to comment number 2.
6	Topa, Mary A. (Georgia Forest Watch)	7/23/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Supports proposal to right-size road system -Hope that we will consider (in future) closing the entire length of McClure Creek Road and Devils Den Road (see Feb 	Comment noted.

			26, 2014 comments)	
7	Corcoran, Kathleen	7/16/2014	-Close Patterson Creek and McClure Creek Rds to motorized traffic only -volunteer interested in maintaining these "trails"	See response to comment number 2.
8	Palmer, Paula	7/22/2014	-Protest closing of Patterson Creek and McClure Creek Rds to horse use -far too few trails to limit access to horses	See response to comment number 2.
9	Beavers, Monica	7/22/2014	-Reconsider closing of Patterson Creek and McClure Creek Rds (keep open for horses) -loss of access to "trails"	See response to comment number 2.
10	Cobb, Charles	7/21/2014	-Object to any road closures, withdrawals, limitations, restrictions, or other actions that limit and exclude access to public lands (by motorcycle, 4 wheel drives, dune buggies, horses, llamas, or foot traffic)	Hikers and equestrians are free to travel cross-country throughout the CONF. National Forests are directed to determine the minimum road system needed for safe and efficient travel, and for administration, utilization, and protection of National Forest system lands. Roads no longer meeting forest resource management objectives may be decommissioned or considered for other uses, such as for trails (36 CRF 212.5). Roads, or segments thereof, may be closed to all vehicle use as provided in 36 CFR 261. This information is disclosed in the Final EA on page 1.
11	Tarrant, Nanci	7/21/2014	-Close Patterson Creek and McClure Creek Rds to motorized traffic only, leave open to bike, hike, and horse -so few horse trails on east side of Cohuttas -volunteer interested in maintaining trails	See response to comment number 2.
12	Herman, Bonny	7/21/2014	-Do not close "trails" to	See response to com-

			horseback riding, so few options -allow riding community a way to partner to offset maintenance cost	ment number 2.
13	Cobb, Neil E.	7/19/2014	-from Hells Hollow, Patterson Creek is the shortest, quickest, and most convenient access to Tumbling Creek/Cohutta Wilderness -Patterson Creek Rd meets the definition of a public way, prescriptive right of way, or public roadway and should remain open -interest in contributing limited personal resources to assist in resolution of some of the problems in this area -dumping along Patterson Creek Road	See response to comment number 10.
14	Holland, Jim	7/18/2014	-opposed to closure of Patterson Creek Road to foot traffic -support changing designation from road to trail -trash dumping along road	See response to comment number 2.
15	Tippens, Roger	7/12/2014	-supports proposed closures -interested in other ORV trails open in winter	Comment noted.
16	Hodges, Malcolm (The Nature Conservancy)	7/11/2014	-take care in containing erodible sediments during decommission -decommissioning may require follow-up actions to eliminate invasive species -2006 element occurrence of single <i>Isotria medeoloides</i> (small whorled pogonia) in project area of McClure Creek Road -avoid erosion impacts to Wehunt Lake or Callahan Branch (tributary to McClure Creek) due to a 2009 element occurrence of <i>Etheostoma rufilineatum</i> (redline darter) -1992 element occurrence of	The effects of the decommissioning activities on aquatic resources, and the practices to be employed to minimize the effects are discussed on page 5 of the Final EA. Element occurrence records of proposed, endangered, threatened, sensitive, and locally rare species were utilized in the preparation of a Biological Evaluation of the project.

			<p><i>Convallaria majuscula</i> (American lily-of-the-valley), <i>Cypripedium parviflorum</i> (yellow lady's slipper), <i>Panax quinquefolius</i> (American ginseng), <i>Lonicera dioica</i> (limber honeysuckle), <i>Carex Appalachia</i> (Appalachian sedge), and <i>Symphyotrichum georgianum</i> (Georgia aster) in vicinity of Tibbs Trail</p> <p>-avoid erosion impacts to Dill Creek, which contains occurrences of <i>Percina kusha</i> (bridled darter)</p>	
17	Howell, Shepherd	7/16/2014	<p>-support closure of Patterson Creek and McClure Creek Roads</p> <p>-closings should be done to maintain foot access on old roadway</p> <p>-support seasonal closure of OHV trails (December-April)</p>	Comment noted. See response to comment number 2 regarding maintaining hiking access.
18	Croy, Phillip	7/24/2014	<p>-keep Patterson Creek Road open to motorcycle, convert to multi-use trail</p> <p>-endurance bike rider group interested in conducting some maintenance on Patterson Creek Road if it is not closed to this use</p>	See response to comment number 2.
19	Pulliam, Douglas	6/28/2014	Do not close Patterson Creek Road	Comment noted.
20	Pulliam, Michelle	6/28/2014	Do not close Patterson Creek Road	Comment noted.
21	Pulliam, Scott	6/28/2014	Do not close Patterson Creek Road	Comment noted.
22	Pulliam, Nichole	6/28/2014	Do not close Patterson Creek Road	Comment noted.
23	Pulliam Locke, Teresa	6/27/2014	<p>-Patterson Creek Road is part of family and local history and used for access to other parts of National Forest</p> <p>-No evidence of damage on Patterson Creek Road</p>	Comment noted.
24	Nicholson, Hillary	7/26/2014	Extremely disappointed about proposed closure of roads in the Conasauga-Tumbling	Comment noted.

		Creek area	
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APPENDIX C

Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest New Trail Construction Criteria

Proposed Trail Name _____
 Proposed Trail Length _____
 District _____

First Tier Criteria:

1. Is there likelihood of sufficient funding for design and construction? Please provide detailed explanation in separate written narrative.
2. Is there a document that details planning, construction, and maintenance costs? Please provide detailed explanation in separate written narrative.
3. Is there an organization that has adopted the trail and is responsible for maintenance? Please provide a detailed 10-Year Maintenance Plan.
4. Does the proposal comply with the Forest Land Management Plan?

Must answer YES to all First Tier Criteria before proceeding to next round of evaluation

Second Tier Criteria:

2 Points for Yes, 0 for No:

5. Does it tie into existing historic, scenic or national trail? _____
6. Has there been user demand identified for this type of trail? _____
7. Does it use existing travel ways or routes (existing prism)? _____
8. Does it create positive use/impact at an existing facility? _____
9. Does this trail enhance the current trail system on the Forest? _____
10. Can it be maintained to standard based on planned location? _____
11. Is there ease of access from established major roads/year round access? _____
12. There is no potential conflict with other users? _____

If the score is between 12-16, proceed to Third Tier of Questions.
 If the score is between 6-12, further analysis is necessary before proceeding.
 If the score is between 1-6, trail proposal is dropped from further consideration.

SCORE _____

Third Tier Criteria:

13. Is it multi-use?
 - 5 Three or more Uses
 - 3 Two Uses
 - 0 No Multiple Use

14. Do you have volunteer support for maintenance and financial support?
 - 5 Established Group With Record of Following Through on Commitments
 - 3 New Partner with Signed Commitment and Identified Resources for Project
 - 0 Potential partner has no identified plan or funding

15. Does it require support infrastructure i.e. parking lot, restrooms?
 - 5 Low Degree of Development Required or Infrastructure in place
 - 3 Moderate Degree of Development Required
 - 1 High Degree of Development Required

16. Impact to Chattahoochee-Oconee NF workload and budget?
 - 5 Low
 - 3 Medium
 - 1 High

17. Proximity to similar trail experience?
 - 5 No similar experience or trail type within 1 hour drive.
 - 3 1 similar experience or trail type within 1 hour drive.
 - 1 2 or more similar experiences or trail type within 1 hour drive.

18. Is the trail _____?
 - 5 More than 20 Miles in Length
 - 3 Between 10-20 Miles in Length
 - 1 Under 10 Miles in Length

19. Will it be a loop trail?
 - 5 Will connect to another major trail (greater than 5 miles in length)?
 - 3 Will connect to another minor trail (less than 5 miles in length)?
 - 1 Does not connect to another trail at all?

If trail proposal is between 30-35, move forward with proposal.

If trail proposal is between 20-29, further analysis is needed before proceeding.

If trail proposal is between 1-19, drop proposal from further analysis.

Score _____

APPENDIX D

Specialist Report
Dick Rightmyer, Forest Soils Scientist
CONF

UNDERSTANDING EROSION

The process of erosion is natural and occurs on all landscapes. The current landscape is a result of numerous processes, the most recent being erosion. In the southeastern U.S., erosion occurs predominantly as a result of the interaction of water with soil. Water erosion is a common geologic process that is responsible for the leveling of mountains and the other land features. Natural rates of erosion are often very slow and occur frequently whenever soils interact with moving water. This type of chronic erosion occurs across the landscape. Occurring less frequently is a catastrophic type of erosion associated with large storm events and mass failure of soils. These two types of erosion are natural and it is only when the rate and extent of erosion exceeds a natural rate it is called accelerated erosion. Accelerated erosion is often caused by human disturbance of a stable soil. It is this type of erosion that should be controlled.

Erosion is the process of soil particle detachment and movement. When the soil particles are detached from the soil aggregate particles can be carried away by the action of falling raindrops, flowing water, or freezing and thawing. On bare soil, such as a native surfaced road, the force of a raindrop hitting the ground (raindrop splash) can transport soil particles several feet under a heavy rainfall. The action of flowing water can transport soil particles for great distances where the flow is concentrated in gullies and rills (small gullies), depending on the gradient and length of the slope. Steep slopes allow water to flow at higher velocity thus it can transport more soil, and detach more particles along the way. The erosion process of freezing and thawing is largely a detachment mechanism caused by the influence of moisture is the soil and soil temperatures that fluctuate between freezing and thawing. As water freezes in the soil, often within the upper few inches, it expands, carrying soil particles with it. When thawing occurs, soil particles are deposited in a new location. These detached particles, now separated from the soil aggregate, are susceptible to further erosion.