

BCHVH Public Lands Committee Jan 9, 2017 Meeting with Forest Service at Headquarters, Marion, VA

Attendees: Nancy Sluys, Gina Haggis, Diane Cherry
Forest Service: Sara Abbott, Stephen Hmurciak

On January 17th Nancy had sent a letter to Joby Timm, the GW/JNF Forest Supervisor, recommending that out temporary Area Ranger, Jim Thompson, for the position. This was the first item discussed. The position was given to Barry Garten, who was the ranger in the Clinch district. He will be covering both the Clinch district and the MRNRA for the first few months. He has been with the forest service for many years, recently in the Clinch district he has worked on timber management, putting in trails, handled High Knob tower burning down, Devil's Bathtub visitor surge after social media postings (30 visitors/month went up to 2000/month with traffic parking problems on the access road). The Clinch River Coalition helps to maintain trails in that area.

Kiosk Parking lot expansion on Brush Creek Road – The NEPA process is still going on. Sara is very close to sending out the scoping letter for this project. For funding purposes this project is being combined with the work for the trailhead to Yellow Branch coming in from Hungry Horse camp. Sara is working to expand the parking area to accommodate 10-15 horse trailers. They expect to not need as much crushed rock due to the gravel nature of the existing footing.

Question of use of horse camps, has there been a decline? The FS feels use of Fox Creek horse camp is increasing. Hussey Mountain and Collins Cove not as busy during the week. The usually have a full time camp host on the weekends in Fox Creek and Collins Cove.

Sara mentioned that the ranger in the Lee district up north near Eastern Divide, has a meeting with multi user groups – horses, hikers, and bikers. She will see if this can be set up in our area.

Asked about the Woodpecker management project, which we has submitted a comment on last October. They have been planning to get in touch with folks who entered comments and coordinate going out to the area to view concerns about visual changes to the trail as result of the wood timbering. Nancy indicated if they were going in January to contact Diane since she would be out of town.

Nancy asked if Sara and Stephen would like to be on our email list as we use to do with WJ and they said yes, though they probably cannot make that many meetings.

Nancy asked where things stood with the Trail Plan that was paused back in July of 2015. Could any work be done on any of the proposed trails or reroutes, especially those that were to correct the more dangerous sections of the trails. Sara indicated all is basically on hold for now with the new ranger coming in and hiring freezes that have occurred so they still have not permanent replacements for several folks that they lost this year due to transfer or retirement. The new ranger will need to determine if they can move forward on any projects. There is a new idea to develop a more comprehensive plan than just the trail plan, looking at landscape level, timbering, burns, watershed, etc. so is much bigger picture. They will decide to look at either the east end or the high country first in developing the newer plan.

Nancy asked if we can prioritize certain areas where there are safety concerns. Yes, but their staff has gone from 10 to 5 so they are limited in what they can accomplish.

Asked about other progress on the Valley Divide project. Contract for clearing trail is ready to be put out. There is one area where they would like to make a change for a better tie in to the old road at the end of the new trail section, so this has delayed things a little. The work needs to be done this spring though so they should move forward soon.

Steven mentioned the Hickory Ridge trail near the road where the new trail section starts would be bad for horses since it is on the fall line, but he thought perhaps getting permission to allow horses to go up to the VHHT trail using the AT trail might be possible.

Sara brought up the Pink Trail that parallels Brush Creek Rd. VDOT has some money available for use where trails intersect with roadways. She mentioned the concerns for the horse riders on along Brush Creek Rd. They looked at the area and had some ideas for putting in an access trail close to the road. Sara asked how far the trail would need to be from the road for most horses to feel okay with the traffic. We estimated a 12 foot section perhaps for horse use to some traffic.

Some items the forest service fixed in late 2016 - Sugar Hollow to Kirk Hollow area, in eastern end near FS 14 Francis Hill area on VHHT, Iron Mountain horse camp access trail (named the Arrowhead Trail). They had issues with dozer repairs last year and are getting a new dozer so hope to be able to get to other areas this year.

We mentioned that the 602 end of Mike's Gap trail has bad mud hole. We also asked about improving the rocky area on the VHHT going east from 602, where they did some work to help with drainage recently. We also mentioned that the Yellow Branch trail needs some hand work on the trail to remove burr – a good project for our chapter.

Stephen asked if we wanted to adopt the Little Dry Run Wilderness Trail since Nancy and Diane have been certified for cross cut saw use. We agree to adopt the trail.

The FS noticed someone has been working on the Henley Hollow trail making improvements.

We asked about the Little Wilson Creek Wilderness area, since Jim Thompson had mentioned wanting out input there. They have some funds for management of the brook trout and many of the trails are designated for horses. The main project is to everywhere the trail crosses drainage should be improved. The wild ponies and cattle can access this area, they may need strategic fencing to keep them out of some areas. Jay has submitted some projects for money but needs NEPA approvals.

Nancy asked if NEPA folks could be hired outside the FS? They were not sure.

Sara asked Nancy to limit the use of ATVs in the range land during the endurance ride to emergency use only. Nancy agreed.

Forest Service would love to have us participate in the Public Lands Day events again in 2017.

America Core has a partnership with the Forest Service and there is a \$6000 scholarship to a qualifying young adult.

Diane to follow up with Sue about any updates needed for our volunteer forms.

Forest Service would love to help us pack out the remains of an old out house in the Racoon Branch Wilderness area. They would burn as much as possible but some metal object remain and will need to be packed out. We mentioned that Tommy Nestlerode, with the SWVA chapter, does packing as well.

Additional Update on the Friends of Mount Rogers Meeting – January 25th

I joined the FOMR last November and have been attending their monthly meetings. At each meeting I have been to Sara Abbott and Jim Thompson or Barry Garten have attended. When I joined in November they were very happy to have a BCH member join them and hear that we'd be happy to help them on projects if needed. The Friends welcomed the new Area Ranger, Barry Garten, by giving him \$10,000 from the friends for the FS use. (The Friends donate 10% of their proceeds to the FS.) At the January meeting Sara gave a quick presentation on the MRNRA area and the variety of activities, environments, and areas that they monitor here. Jay Martin from the FS gave a presentation on working with volunteer groups. We then did an exercise where we were asked to come up with suggestions for how we could be more useful or improve awareness of the FOMR and the MRNRA area. This resulted in 5 general areas to discuss: 1) volunteers/membership improvement, 2) interpretive presentations, 3) new project ideas, 4) outreach to public, 5) funding and grants. We were then asked to pick our top three and over all they ended up being: 1-interpretive presentations, 2-volunteer/members and 3-outreach. The FS was going to review all of the suggestions and ideas presented and hopefully next meeting we'll have better direction to move forward.

Several ideas were really interesting, like establishing a 'dark sky' park area for viewing the stars with telescopes and having something at Whitetop to identify the mountain ranges.

Question – should the chapter join as a FOMR member and if yes, who should the contact person be?

Additional Update on Woodpecker Management Project Meeting – January 26th

Jay Martin from the FS called Diane to invite her to the Jan 25th meeting to discuss this project. He said he was asking the other horse groups to this meeting as well. We met at the forest service work center where we were given a copy of the scoping letter and two maps of the logging section areas. Jay gave a quick overview of their plans for the timber areas which along FS16 included a 100 foot section from the road where they would 'feather' the number of trees that are taken down in this section to limit the effect on the visual look for anyone riding down the road. Then we went out to look at the logging areas planned along FS16 road. The forest service had measured the 100 foot distance and usually this flagging was hard to see from the road. Most of the cutting areas had many rhododendrons that would help maintain the current view.

Where they need to put in a road to the staging area they have tried to angle the road to also limit the visual changes to anyone using the road. When they are working on the area they said they would put signs up on the road so folks would be aware.

Any roads or staging areas will be seeded and restored to a usable habitat for deer and should make good break stops when they are eventually restored to grassy areas (as has been done in the Frye Hill area).

There is no plan to add roads or staging areas on FS857 near the Sugar Hollow Pond area since the logging areas are close to the road. There is also no plan for a 100 foot section, since the logging areas are not close to the VHHT. The other horse groups did not go over to this section but Jay, Sara and I went over so I could get a look from the VHHT. With the steepness of the hillside and the distance to the logging areas along the FS857 road it was not possible to see these areas even with all the leaves off the trees.

There is a plan to add a road off of FS856, but as this is a 'dead end' due to the Brunswick trail being decommissioned they did not feel it was necessary to have a buffer section in the areas

where the logging was close to the road, which is a very small section.

There is no plan to have buffer sections or to add roads or staging areas to the Kirk Hollow area since the cutting areas are close to the road and there is limited use of the trail except to access the VHHT.

We were the only horse group that sent in any comments on this project. They have really tried to address our concerns to maintain the visual beauty of the area when riding through. The other horse groups seemed very happy with the way the project had been planned.

They will also let us know ahead of time when they will do any of the spraying to insects or invasive plants in this area.

Additional Update on the meeting with Regional Forrester Tony Tooke – January 30th

Held at the Martha Washington Inn in Abingdon. About 25 different people came from many organizations that help the FS. The Nature Conservancy, Fish and Inland Games, District Forest Ranger Barry Garten and Sara Abbott, Blue Ridge Discovery Center, Department of Conservation & Recreation, Mount Rogers ATC group, Piedmont AT group, Friends of Mount Rogers, and MRNRA Trails Advocacy Coalition are all I can remember. There was a brief speech from Barry Garten thanking folks for coming. Tony Tooke then gave a short speech about the states he'd worked in throughout our Region 8. He went on to explain how he had also worked in DC for several years and was happy to be in this area, which he had never worked in. Tony brought up the problems with reductions in the forest service budget and staff. Along with their shrinking budget, there has been an overall 50% reduction in employees across all forests. The biggest problem with the FS budget has been the increasing use of funds to fight wild fires. This year it was over 50% of the budget and is expected to climb to 60-75% if no changes are made. He expressed his hopes that the bills HR.167 and S.235 to provide funding for wildfire suppressions would be passed since they have bipartisan support. He also said that 2016 was the worst year in a long time for the fires in the forests of the southeast. Over 300,000 acres of national forests in the southeast were burned. The one good item he mentioned was that he felt that there had been real collaboration between the federal, state, and local levels of government to help coordinate efforts to control these fires.

After Tony's introduction we were all given a chance to speak with all of the other folks there and to have a chance to speak with him. I asked him if he had any updates for how they were going to respond to the passage of the Trails Stewardship Act. He indicated there were no details yet on how they'd do this and we discussed the effort needed to get new volunteers qualified to ensure their safety out working on trails. We also discussed the budget allocation changes for 2016 and Tony indicated that we had received a small increase for Region 8 due to the larger population and use many of our areas experience. I mentioned that there are some places out west with smaller populations that were not happy to have the allocation methods changed to reflect use but he only indicated that was just happy to have had some increase here since Region 8 includes 12 states and Puerto Rico. Last item I had time to discuss was if he was concerned about the possible sale of public lands. He indicated that President Trump's sons were outdoor folks and he did not think the president supported the sale of public lands.

There were some references from Tony and others I spoke with about their concerns with the changes that are going on in Washington and the overall affect that might have with our natural resources – concerns about pipelines, environmental issues, and endangered species.