

Notes from Forest Service Meeting - September 26, 2017

Barry Garten (new Area Ranger for Mt Rogers NRA) , Nancy Sluys, Diane Cherry

Barry informed us that there will a project coming on Ewing Mountain in the East End of the MRNRA.

The project is intended to clear some areas for wildlife habitat and will include some prescribed burning and selected cutting and thinning. The areas may be several acres up to 20 acres. Most of the woods on the East End are all around the same age so without some intervention these woods will probably all die around the same time in about 50 years. Part of the reason for the thinning is to provide room for other younger growth to perpetuate the forests and provide habitat for different species of wildlife. Ideally they would like to have old, current, and young growth throughout the region. The project is also designed to bring forest users together.

A collaborative group will be formed with all user types - horse folks, hikers, bikers, fishermen, hunters, birders, and other forest users to address concerns and to plan the best way to implement the project, keeping in mind visual appeal along trail corridors and other concerns of forest users. He wants to reach out to each user group and develop an effective means of communication with everyone. His idea is that once he gets to know the groups and the groups get to know each other we will be able to have more meaningful discussions about any issues that may come up. Also, forming the collaborative will allow money that generated from the timber sale to remain in Mount Rogers for use on trails and other projects.

Other issues important to Barry include concerns about sediment run off into streams. Sediment in streams blocks the sun and causes problems in the water for the aquatic life. Improperly designed trails are a big source of sediment runoff. In looking at the trail system Barry is asking us to let him know which of the horses trails are causing erosion problems so a solution can be found. He is not advocating closing viable trails but wants to find solutions to runoff problems.

We did bring up a few questions to Barry:

1. When can the Brush Creek Kiosk parking area enlargement get moving? He will check into this and get back to us.
2. What can be done about the Valley Divide Trail to provide a better loop for horse traffic than the road to Hurricane Campground. Nancy has received emails from folks who have been using the Hickory Creek Trail (a hiking trail) to connect back to the VHHT. These riders had told Nancy that there was a forest service employee at the trailhead telling them that they could not use that trail for the horse traffic. Barry was not aware that there was any issue going on here but will look into it and find a solution.
3. In discussing trails with the most need, we told Barry that the Divide Trail, among others, which connects the Iron Mountain trail to the VHHT in the Hussy Mt Area, is in bad shape. Although the FS tried to fix it up a few years ago the portions of it that are on the natural fall line have continued to erode and have become dangerous, especially in wet weather. We mentioned that WJ had looked at this before his transfer and found another way to run the trail that was more sustainable and on the contour. Our hope is to have a reroute that will create a safer way to get to and from the Iron Mountain Trail. Other reroutes were also discussed.
4. Lastly we asked about any updates on overall trail system improvements. Barry thinks it will take some time to get this together since he needs to know more about the trails and the user groups in this area. He is hoping that after we get to know him and form the collaborative group that we should be able to move forward more easily to get things done. He is not advocating mass closing of trails but would like to look at what trails (designated and currently non designated) are most important to the system as a whole and to the users and to put together a plan that works best for everyone.

We are very encouraged by our meeting and feel Barry is forward thinking and very communicative and easy to talk to and has many innovative ideas. He plans on being here for the long haul. He desires better communication between forest users and the forest service and between each other. He would like to meet with us more often at least on a quarterly basis to discuss plans and ideas.