

Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative Public Meeting

Remarks by Tom Speaks and Katherine Medlock concerning the role of the Forest Service and the Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative

Erwin Tennessee, October 12, 2010

Tom Speaks, Forest Supervisor for the Cherokee National Forest (CNF) welcomed everyone to the meeting. He noted that the forest covers 650,000 acres in 10 counties in East Tennessee. Supervisor Speaks also recognized his staff in attendance: Terry Bowerman, District Ranger and Don Palmer District Ranger for Johnson, Carter, Sullivan and Washington Counties. He clarified that the focus for the Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (CNFLRI) project is the health of the forest, including trees, plants, animals, but not trails or recreation. He discussed the history of the forest's formation, noting that the Forest Service purchased land from private landowners, with most land purchased between the period of 1911 into the 1930s. Those private landowners had been using the land mostly for extractive uses, such as farming or timbering. For many years CNF took a custodial management role for the land.

Most of this forest is 90 to 100 years old and fires have been suppressed over time, leading to less disturbance of the forest. In the past, there was a fair amount of logging which removed some species of trees, such as white oak. He noted that in Shady Valley a large amount of it was originally white pine, most of which is gone. Supervisor Speaks also explained that various diseases and pests have altered the forest. Chestnut blight removed most of the chestnut forest. Pests such as pine beetle and hemlock wooly adelgid have moved in and are impacting the forest. Invasive species such as tree of heaven and the invasive plant kudzu are invasive species of concern. Recurring droughts have also puts stress on ecosystems.

Overall, the health of forest is not at a level that the Forest Service would like to see. Many tree species begin to decline around 100 years of age and many areas of the forest have same-aged trees because they are old plantation sites or old farm fields that have changed to forest. Some forest areas need active management to restore a more diverse balance of tree ages.

In discussing the current management of the forest, Supervisor Speaks noted that the Cherokee Forest Management Plan's last update took 10 years to develop. Due in part to the length of time involved, some people disengaged from the process. Many people left the planning process before it was completed, while some public interests did not participate.

Many people in the Forest Service have recognized the need for management approaches that support increased health of the forest. Supervisor Speaks has heard from many stakeholders over time about these concerns and the need to restore the forest. He explained that, with management direction from the forest management plan,

they formed a committee process that included a wide range of interests concerned about CNF, to talk over desired future conditions and how to achieve those conditions.

He approached many regional and state user group representatives about getting involved and making recommendations concerning how to address problems and improve forest health. He asked The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to join the effort and they agreed to invest their time and to help raise funds to support the project. The Forest Service also dedicated funds to support formation of the committee and worked with TNC to develop a list of potential groups to include. The committee met in late fall 2009 and were charged with working together to make recommendations on science based restoration approaches for CNF.

The CNFLRI committee is working to develop an understanding of the current state of the forest and to restore it to an agreed upon condition. He noted that primeval forest conditions are probably not possible due to so many years of human influence on the land. However, it is possible to determine the forest types that are needed to ensure a healthy, well-functioning forest. It is hoped that the diversity of perspectives represented by the committee will help to ensure that ideas are evaluated thoroughly and that the best evaluation tools are utilized. Supervisor Speaks then thanked the committee members for their work to date and introduced Katherine Medlock of TNC.

Ms. Medlock explained that the project is only for the North end of CNF, which includes seven counties. She described the purpose and objectives for the project as development of a set of scientifically-sound, ecologically-appropriate, and consensus-based recommendations to the Forest Service, the need for a common vision, and the process for giving recommendations to CNF. Monitoring will also be a long term focus for the project to determine how recommendations are being implemented, or if obstacles exist, the committee will suggest how to overcome them.

She explained that the steering committee was also charged with re-engaging the public in this process of developing recommendations. She noted that the committee's membership is diverse and includes user groups such as hunters, conservation and environmental groups, local government, industry and state and federal agencies.

Ms. Medlock provided an overview of the process that the committee is following. The committee is following a structured decision making process. First, the committee needs to decide what is the desired future condition for the CNF; essentially the composition and structure of the forest. The recommendations need to encompass all the values for the forest which are reflected on the committee membership.

The committee is currently collecting data about current conditions in the forest. The committee will use computer modeling to help analyze and model possible conditions. The next step is to compare where the forest is now to the desired future condition and then to determine how get there. This may require restoration projects.

Many different management scenarios, all of which are covered in the existing forest management plan will be needed. Examples of some of the restoration activities that

could be recommended to restore the forest are invasive species treatments, prescribed fire, timber harvesting or stand improvement activities, or stream or road rehabilitation.

She also noted that the committee will need to focus on how get to the end point in the most cost effective manner. She explained that the recommendations of the steering committee are not binding on the CNF. The committee cannot make decisions for the CNF about forest management. The Forest Service will still determine whether or not to undertake any projects. However, it is hoped that by working with many diverse interests up front to determine potential management actions, many of the problems or concerns that might arise can be resolved early on; thus making it much easier to get restoration projects proposed and enacted.