

**Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative**  
**Case Statement**  
*(revised Jan. 24, 2012)*

**Purpose and Intent**

The Cherokee National Forest (CNF) is home to an incredible array of natural, recreational, cultural and historic resources. Our purpose is to ensure that the Cherokee Landscape Restoration Initiative focuses on the long-term science-based ecological restoration and management of the native vegetation, rare communities, watersheds and aquatic systems, to maintain and improve the overall health of the CNF. The history of the land shows us a landscape that has been altered by past land management practices. Some of these past influences have left portions of the CNF in a degraded and unnatural condition. The introduction and imminent threat of numerous pests and pathogens further threaten the health of our forests and streams. Add to this, the potential impacts from climate change, and it becomes obvious that the CNF would benefit from implementation of long-term restoration and management in order to maintain and restore native vegetation, rare communities, watersheds, aquatic systems and healthy, resilient, robust forests.



The mission of the Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. The Cherokee National Forest has the responsibility to manage, protect, and enhance the health of the vegetation and aquatic resources on Federal lands in East Tennessee. Our intention is to support the CNF in achieving its mission through the implementation of a public participation process that is scientifically sound and ecologically appropriate. This process seeks to find common ground among a diversity of interest groups that will help the Forest Service make better decisions about the future of our shared natural resources.

Ecological restoration, as defined by the Society for Ecological Restoration, is "the process of assisting the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged, or destroyed". Sound forest restoration requires an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach rooted in conservation biology and ecosystem restoration principles that include preserving and protecting intact landscapes (particularly those that serve as reference or baseline conditions); allowing the land to heal itself; and, where necessary, helping it to do so through active restoration management. On Forest Service lands, "Restoration focuses on establishing the composition, structure, pattern, and ecological processes necessary to make terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems sustainable, resilient, and healthy under current and future conditions." (FSM 2020). Restoration should be scientifically supported and ecologically appropriate for the specific communities on the Cherokee National Forest. Actions would result in a healthy, resilient landscape, which "will have greater capacity to survive natural disturbances and large scale threats to sustainability, especially under changing and uncertain future environmental conditions, such as those driven by climate change and increasing human uses" (<http://www.fs.fed.us/restoration/>).

## **Approach and Objectives**

A collective group of stakeholders have come together to reach agreement on a science-based process for supporting the ecological restoration and adaptive management of the native vegetation, rare communities, watersheds and aquatic systems of the CNF. We will work collaboratively with the Forest Service to identify, and prioritize the needs for restoration, and design and initiate a robust public participation component to this process utilizing a variety of sources including national, regional, and local/community expertise. Results will be compiled and presented as a set of recommendations to the Cherokee National Forest, which can be considered for future management decisions.

Our approach will emphasize public participation and information sharing in order to reach community-supported and science-based methods for forest management and implementing ecological restoration on the ground. The CNF has pre-defined procedures for determining management decisions. These procedures remain in place and have final authority over all action taken or not taken within the CNF. Recognizing this fact, it is imperative that the management recommendations that emerge from the Landscape Restoration Initiative conform to these procedures.

The objectives for the Northern Portion of the Cherokee National Forest are to:

- Define a common vision for the ecological restoration and management of the CNF
- Engage/Re-engage a diverse group of stakeholders interested in ecological restoration and management of the CNF including stakeholders from the local communities and other individuals or groups who are interested in participating in the process.
- Provide a structured process designed to engage a diverse group of stakeholders
- Recommend a plan for the implementation of ecological restoration that includes specific measurable objectives and prescribes management actions that are consistent with the mission of the Forest Service
- Establish a system for monitoring and evaluating restoration activities to allow for adaptive management over time.

## **Process and Timeline**

The Landscape Restoration Initiative process will be completed in 15 months. The first step will be the establishment of a Steering Committee for the project. The Steering Committee will have diverse representation from the stakeholder groups. The Steering Committee will be responsible for overseeing all stages of the process, synthesizing information and making recommendations to the stakeholder group.

The first three months of the Landscape Restoration Initiative process will be devoted to a situation assessment. The situation assessment will include: key participant interviews; review of the five-year summary of implementation of the CNF Land and Resources Management Plan; review of questionnaire responses solicited from a diverse array of stakeholders; and the gathering of existing pertinent data (CNF, USFWS, State Natural Heritage Program, State Wildlife Resources Agency, State Forest Service, Fire Learning Network data, NGO's, etc.). All this information will be synthesized to: 1) provide baseline information of forest conditions and ecosystems on the CNF; 2) extrapolate future trends; 3) monitor and evaluate the implementation and progress of restoration efforts; 4) monitor and evaluate changes in forest conditions and ecosystems to provide a feedback loop allowing for adaptive management over time.

The final 12 months of the Landscape Restoration Initiative will be devoted to a series of stakeholder meetings and conferences designed to share research and resource information, and solicit public input and involvement. During this series of meetings and conferences, the participants will be asked to work in a step-wise fashion toward defining specific measurable goals for restoration and management for the CNF. The conferences will provide the stakeholders the opportunity to interact with experts within a variety of natural resource fields, engage with other participants, have meaningful discussions, and collectively influence the process for making specific management recommendations to the Forest Service. Finally the group will establish monitoring protocols and an evaluation process that will keep stakeholders informed of the progress of the Landscape Restoration Initiative—providing for their ongoing participation and input.