

## Frequently Asked Questions About the Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (CNFLRI)

*updated March 21, 2012*

**Why is the Cherokee National Forest a special place?** The Cherokee National Forest (CNF) in the Southern Appalachian Mountains was established by President Roosevelt in 1936 from four separate forests created in the 1910s and 1920s. Today, it comprises 650,000 acres of contiguous forest in southwestern Virginia, east Tennessee, northwestern North Carolina and northern Georgia. The forest is the largest tract of public land in Tennessee.

The Appalachian Mountains are one of the most biodiverse areas in the world and are home to more than 20,000 species of plants and animals, including 43 species of mammals, 55 species of amphibians and reptiles, and 154 species of fish. There are 72 species of commercial and non-commercial trees.

People also enjoy this natural resource. The forest receives two million visitors a year. There are over 600 miles of trails through the forest, including 150 miles of the Appalachian Trail. There are eleven designated wildernesses, which comprise a total of 67,000 acres. The forest also provides timber resources, although this use has declined over time. The forest supports local water supplies by recharging groundwater and cleaning and protecting surface waters. Much of the drinking water enjoyed by residents of East Tennessee originates in the national forest.

**What is the group's purpose?** The CNFLRI is comprised of a committee that evaluated the current condition of the forest and to made recommendations to help restore the forest to a more natural state. The purpose of the committee is to ensure that the Cherokee Landscape Restoration Initiative focuses on both the long-term, science-based ecological restoration and management of the forest's native vegetation, rare communities, watersheds and aquatic systems and on maintaining and improving the forest's overall health. The committee's evaluation process helped to estimate the distribution of forest types across the landscape, assessed the current condition of the forest types and determined the degree to which current conditions deviate from the natural expected ranges. The group then made recommendations for how the forest could be restored in a report provided to the CNF and posted to the CNFLRI website.

**Why does the forest need restoration?** Due to past land use practices as well as impacts from invasive insects and diseases, some parts of the forest are not healthy. The lands of the Cherokee were acquired over time and include areas that were once farms, mines or used for other extractive purposes. The legacy of these past uses is still apparent in some areas today. Sometimes this land becomes reforested with a much higher percentage of invasive or non-native species.

Since some old farms that reverted to forests grew up all at once, these lands may also lack a diversity of tree ages. This lack of diversity in tree ages means that some forest types may contain mostly older trees and not enough younger trees to replace them, leading to a decline of the forest ecosystem over the long term. The committee is evaluating the types of forests that are present today such as oak hickory forests or Southern Appalachian Cove forests and determining their condition and need for restoration.

**Who is on the committee?** The CNFLRI Steering Committee members represent a diverse cross-section of key stakeholder interests, including affected conservation groups, wildlife/hunting organizations, forest product businesses, concerned residents, federal, state and local governments, and others as appropriate. They have now formed a [watershed team](#) to focus on implementation.

**Why did the Forest Service need to get suggestions from a committee?** The diversity of perspectives on the committee led to new ideas that everyone could support. Much of the debate and exploration of ideas has taken place and can be used to propose restoration projects that are better designed and meet real needs.

**Who is in charge of the committee?** The group was managed by a neutral facilitator who helped manage the process and recorded decisions to create the final report to CNF. For more on group decision processes, please see the [Committee Protocols](#).

**How did the group start?** The Nature Conservancy convened the group to engage diverse interests in establishing a common vision for how to restore the Cherokee Forest. The Nature Conservancy and the US Forest Service each have one member who served on the committee.



**What areas of the forest were evaluated?** This process focused on the Northern Cherokee Forest only.

**Will this planning effort change how and where I can recreate or enjoy the forest?** No. The plan does not address recreation or uses; it addresses forest vegetation types. However, if an area has declined and lost ecological diversity, restoration activities can lead to improved habitat conditions, which in turn can mean better bird watching, hunting or hiking.

**How long will this process take to complete?** The CNFLRI's thirteen members completed their work in early 2012 and provided [a report](#) to the CNF. The report covers a 20-year implementation period. They are now developing a pilot implementation plan at the watershed scale to demonstrate how their recommendations can be implemented. For more see the [watershed team page](#).

**What information does the group use to make decisions?** The committee is utilizing existing forest data from the US Forest Service as well as new data collected from 600 plots that have been mapped to learn about what types of forests exist currently in the Cherokee. The group will then make suggestions for which forest types need to be restored based whether expected forest types are abundant or declining. Models, such as Landfire, are being used to help predict outcomes from various management options from "do nothing" to active restoration actions such as, prescribed burns, harvesting or planting. To review meeting minutes and data discussions, [click here](#).

**Does this work replace the current Forest Management Plan?** No, the plan remains in effect. This process does not replace the [existing Forest Management Plan](#) for the Cherokee National Forest that was developed by the US Forest Service. The plan prescribes the areas where certain management practices are needed or allowed. The CNFLRI follows the plan's current management prescriptions based on how the forest area is designated, such as such as "wilderness; wilderness study area; eligible wild or scenic or recreation river; mixed successional habitats; early successional habitats emphasis; black bear habitat management; or rare communities," to name a few.

**When will the forest be restored?** The work to restore the forest could take decades or longer. The Cherokee Forest will always need restoration activities of some sort, since it will take a long time to bring the forest back into balance. Currently the US Forest Service conducts a few restoration projects each year. It is hoped that the work to evaluate and study the forest can lead to more restoration projects over time.

**Who will pay to implement these ideas?** Primary costs to restore the forest will be borne by the US Forest Service, but other groups may also volunteer time and energy for activities, such as planting native species in areas designated for restoration. The Cherokee National Forest currently receives allocations from the federal government and these funds could be targeted to highest priority areas most in need of restoration.

**How can people participate in this process?** There are several ways to participate: attend a committee meeting and provide comments during the public comment process at the beginning and end of each meeting, send an email to the project's coordinator [Katherine Medlock](#) and she will share those comments with the committee. Check the website frequently for new updates and posting of meeting minutes, presentations, reports or surveys. For any restoration projects proposed, the US Forest Service will still engage the public in the participation process as required by the National Environmental Policy Act. To get on the notification list for the U.S. Forest Service, please contact [Mark Healey](#).

For more information please visit: <http://www.communityplan.net/cherokee/>.