

## **Roads**

There are over 688 miles of designated roads on the North Zone of Cherokee National Forest and many more miles of non-system legacy roads and user created motorized trails. Properly constructed and maintained roads make management of the forest more efficient and provide motorized access for forest users. Roads that do not meet those criteria can cause resource damage from erosion, illegal access, poaching, and as vectors of dispersal for non-native plant and animal species.

The maintenance of Forest Service Roads depends largely on budgetary allocations, which are erratic and have declined in the past 20 years. There are national-level directions for each Forest Service unit to:

Identify the minimum road system needed for safe and efficient travel and for the protection, management, and use of NFS lands; and Identify roads that are no longer needed to meet forest resource management objectives and; therefore, scheduled for decommissioning or considered for other uses (36 CFR 212.5(b)).

Because of the potential of roads to impact water quality, there are directives from within the Forest Service that each National Forest integrate transportation analysis with the Watershed Condition Framework:

[U]nits should seek to integrate the steps contained in the Watershed Condition Framework (WCF) with the six TAP steps contained in FSH 7709.55, Chapter 20, to eliminate redundancy and ensure an iterative and adaptive approach for both processes. We expect that the WCF process, and especially the initial watershed condition assessment (Step A) which has been completed will provide important information for your work on Subpart A, while the TAP process will likewise provide information for the WCF process.

The committee recommends that Cherokee National Forest follow national directions and make a priority of identifying the minimum road system needed to manage the forest with the funds available. Roads which are poorly constructed, causing erosion damage, or are redundant should be scheduled for repair or decommissioning.

For roads which are retained as part of the minimum road system, proper management is essential. Increased law enforcement is needed to decrease illegal vehicle use on closed roads and by “trail blazers” off-road. In situations where legal or illegal uses have caused erosion, the committee recommends working with partner groups to repair damage and plant native vegetation that is beneficial to wildlife.

Several wildlife species benefit from the vegetation on roads managed as linear wildlife openings. When these roads are improperly or illegally used, this important vegetation can be damaged and wildlife that benefits from this habitat along with it. It is especially important that linear wildlife openings be kept closed to traffic during spring and early summer to benefit a suite of wildlife species including ruffed grouse, wild turkey, and deer.