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Southside Project Moves Forward

Forest Service Approves Cutting Old Growth Trees and Harming Green Salamanders

Jackson County & Macon County, NC Tuesday, February 19th, Nantahala District Ranger Mike Wilkins gave final approval for the controversial Southside Project. The project would cut down hundreds of acres of native forests located in the pristine headwaters of the National Wild & Scenic Chattooga River and the Whitewater River, near the Ellicott Rock Wilderness in the Nantahala-Pisgah National Forest.

Wilkins' "decision notice" is the Forest Service's official go-ahead for **logging rare old growth trees and harming regionally imperiled Green Salamanders, while ignoring good science and overwhelming public opposition to the Southside Project.**

Nicole Hayler, Executive Director of the Chattooga Conservancy, a lead NGO in spearheading opposition to the Southside Project, reacted: "We vehemently disagree with the Forest Service's decision, and intend to keep fighting to protect one of the last, most biologically rich and wild places in the Southeastern U.S. **Only one-half of 1% of old growth forests remains in the Southeast, and these rare stands of trees on public lands should be preserved—not liquidated.**"

The Southside Project approves: 1) Cutting irreplaceable old growth forests; 2) Destroying essential habitat for imperiled Green Salamanders; 3) Burning over 2,000 acres repeatedly, drastically exceeding natural fire cycles; 3) Widespread, frequent herbicide applications to kill native forest species in favor of "crop trees;" and, 4) Net loss of taxpayers' money.

The Forest Service acknowledges their Southside proposal generated one of the largest numbers of public comments in recent decades, with the vast majority opposing the project. Since 2017, citizens and NGOs have worked tirelessly and in good faith through the agency's public comment process, to change Southside's outcome. Hayler comments: "The decision to move ahead with the Southside Project—based on junk science and misguided crop tree management—is a slap in the face to a concerned public, and a significant setback for native forest protection."

The irony is that Chattooga Conservancy agrees with Forest Service managers about needing some prescribed burning and cultivating younger forests. But we strongly oppose the way the agency wants to achieve these mutual goals.

"There are hundreds of places to create young forests on the landscape—without cutting old growth trees and destroying critical habitats—and to conduct prescribed burning within reason," said Buzz Williams, former Chattooga Conservancy Executive Director and past Forest Service employee, who holds a degree in Forest Management from Clemson University. Williams said: "For instance, no one with any common sense would prescribe burning in 2-year cycles, which could destroy the highly erodible soils of the Highlands-Cashiers Plateau."

The Southside Project should be shelved and redesigned, until after the new Nantahala-Pisgah Forest Plan is in place. But with over 20,000 comments from citizens about the ongoing forest plan revision, what can the public expect?

Nicole Hayler said: **"Forest Service managers have invested an unprecedented amount of time and resources into promoting key elements of the flawed science that's underpinning the Southside Project. Because Southside involves many of the same issues and same Forest Service decision-makers that are steering the forest plan revision process, it's likely that the Southside Project is also telegraphing how the Nantahala-Pisgah Forest Plan revision will go down."**

Buzz Williams added: **"The public that has rallied for the fight to protect our native forests can count on us to enter the next phase of opposition."**

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