

The CMC Council adopted the following on February 27, 2006:

RECOMMENDATION ON THE PROPOSED SALE OF NATIONAL FOREST LAND

The Conservation Committee recommends that the Carolina Mountain Club adopt the following statement of position regarding the proposed sale of National Forest land:

The Carolina Mountain Club opposes the block sale of National Forest Service land to fund the extension of the Secure Rural Schools & Community Self-Determination Act for the following reasons:

- The large-scale sale of increasingly scarce real estate for the purpose of offsetting short-term financial deficits is unwise and self-defeating in the long run.
- Sale or other transfer of public land should not be linked arbitrarily to a specific, immediate operational need such as the Rural Schools program. Disposition of land should be considered on its own merits.
- If certain National Forest parcels are deemed truly unproductive and not likely to meet the needs of the public as Forest Service lands now or in the future, they should first be offered to other governmental entities or non-profits, such as states or land trusts, to protect the lands for future public benefit, or else exchanged for more important land.

Mail comments to the USDA Forest Service and copies to our Senators and Congressman, or email to SRS_Land_Sales@fs.fed.us, or fax to 202-205-1604

USDA Forest Service
SRS Comments, Lands 4S
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Mailstop 1124
Washington, DC 20250-0003

Senator Richard Burr
161 Patton Avenue, Suite 204
Asheville, NC 28801

Senator Elizabeth Dole
401 N. Main St., Suite 200
Hendersonville, NC 28792

Rep. Charles Taylor
22 S. Pack Square, Suite 330
Asheville, NC 28801

BACKGROUND

In the early 20th century laws were passed to offset counties for property taxes lost when the federal government took land for public forests. Counties were compensated at a rate of 25% of the profit on the timber removed. Moneys were to be used for schools and roads.

In the year 2000, the Secure Rural Schools & Community Self-Determination Act was passed to shore up those counties that had not been able to transition to new means of support as lumbering fell off in their areas over the years and their income based on a percentage of the profits dropped off. This was especially marked in the Northwest where lumbering was very heavy during the early 1900's. This act is set to expire at the end of 2006.

Faced with mounting federal budget deficits and not wanting to cut the funding to counties that are still dependent on this federal money, the Bush administration has proposed as part of the 2007 budget that public lands be sold to fund the extension of the Rural Schools act for five years. During those years they propose that the funding be gradually phased out to encourage counties to find alternate means of support.

The counties in WNC who receive the largest payments are Macon, Graham, Cherokee, Transylvania and Jackson Counties, who together receive about \$400,000 annually. This, however, is small potatoes compared to some other areas. Wasco County in Oregon, for example, receives \$1.8 million.

About 300,000 acres of land have been included in the initially proposed list of tracts. Of this 9,828 acres are in NC, including 3,835 in Nantahala NF and 2,780 in Pisgah. A preliminary assessment of the maps suggests that the most significant areas of concern to the CMC are within 3-10 miles east and northeast of Max Patch, and south and southeast of Wesser where it appears that the Appalachian Trail and the Needmore tract of the Little Tennessee may be directly involved. There may very well be others. We are told that the administration intends to whittle this 300,000 acres down to the neighborhood of 175,000, which is what they think they might need to raise the \$800 million for the rural schools program.

The Forest Service says officially that the three criteria they are using to identify suitable tracts are:

1. Isolation
2. Difficulty to reach and manage
3. No longer meeting Forest Service needs.

Other factors taken into consideration in compiling the initial list were whether the parcels had been previously earmarked for consideration in land exchanges (which the FS frequently does to consolidate blocks of land) or whether they are considering other land acquisition in the vicinity of the parcel. One factor that was NOT considered on this pass

was proximity to other public lands or other important public considerations. They seem to be leaving that up to the public to identify.

For more information, contact Becky Smucker of the CMC who researched this issue for the Conservation Committee BSmucker@charter.net or 828-298-5013.

Thanks for your time and interest!