

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony of

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Before the Subcommittee on National Parks

Forests, and Lands

21 May 1996

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the efforts of the Forest Service regarding ecoregion-based assessments. These comments pertain specifically to the Southern Appalachian Assessment (SAA) and are based on my experience as a member of the scientific panel for the SAA's Terrestrial Plant and Animal Team. The Ruffed Grouse Society's expertise in the effects of silvicultural treatments on forest vegetation and, therefore, on forest wildlife populations led to the invitation from the Forest Service to participate on the aforementioned scientific panel.

The goal of the Ruffed Grouse Society is to promote forest stewardship through sound forest resource management. The ruffed grouse is a game species that requires early-successional forest communities (young forest habitats) and as such is today dependent upon timber harvest operations. Habitats preferred by ruffed grouse are essential to various other species of forest wildlife including the chestnut-sided warbler, yellow-breasted chat, field sparrow, rufous-sided towhee, gray catbird and brown thrasher. All of these species are experiencing significant long-term population declines throughout the southern Appalachian mountains as this region's forests continue to mature.

The SAA is designed to function largely as an inventory and a data clearinghouse to ensure continuity as issues that are common to the National Forests contained within the assessment area are addressed during the forest plan revision process. I have been most impressed with the efforts of the Forest Service to ensure that the SAA provide this information without providing direction as to which strategy is best in any given situation. Data within the SAA include the spatial distribution and the trends for existing forest types and associated wildlife species. In addition, the SAA identifies the capabilities of various types of sites to benefit specific target resources through the implementation of land management activities. Given that the National Forests account for only 17% of the forested land base of the SAA area, these data are provided for state and private ownerships as well as the National Forests. The SAA correctly recognizes that management activities on nonfederal ownerships should be considered when decisions are made regarding proposed activities on National Forest lands but that such consideration is only one element of the decision-making process.

The Ruffed Grouse Society initially shared the concerns of many that the SAA not serve as another tier within the decision-making process of the Forest Service or that the SAA be used to supersede direction outlined within existing forest plans. The Society's involvement in the development of the SAA has greatly ameliorated these initial concerns. However, the Society is concerned that the identification of potential roadless areas through the SAA has indeed become a de facto decision that is currently and likely will continue to provide specific direction for the affected National Forests.

The SAA roadless area inventory has identified and mapped 753,000 acres of potential roadless areas. Approximately 293,000 acres (39%) of the areas identified as potential roadless are considered suitable for timber harvest and are, therefore, appropriate for habitat development for wildlife species that require early-successional forest habitats. This 293,000 acres represents fully 13% of the existing National Forest land base where such habitat management activities can realistically be initiated under existing forest plans.

Although the Forest Service has officially stated that areas designated as potential roadless through the SAA are not off

limits to management activities, the agency is reluctant to propose timber sales within these areas due to concerns over possible confrontation with publics who support roadless area expansion. This reluctance has rendered this one portion of the SAA to function as a decision-making document.

In summary, with the exception of the tacit removal of areas identified as potential roadless from the operable land base, the SAA is an excellent example of a vehicle through which information can be disseminated to enhance the decision-making process without exerting overly-broad direction to that very process. If utilized appropriately, the SAA should greatly aid in the revision of existing forest plans for the National Forests in the southern Appalachians.

Thank you for your time.

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