

FOR THE JOURNAL

The U.S. Forest Service has extended the comment period on its current plan to open the Upper Chattooga River to whitewater rafting. Conservation groups are opposing the plan to build an access trail to the furthest reaches of the Wild and Scenic River.

Forest Service extends comment period on Upper Chattooga

Conservancy battles to stop access trail

THE JOURNAL STAFF

See related editorial, A4.

The US Forest Service has extended the comment period on the environmental assessment on Managing Recreation Uses in the Upper Segment of the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River Corridor by 15 days. Comments are due by Aug. 30.

Last week, the Chattooga Conservancy issued a strong warning to the Forest Service to abandon the latest preferred alternative to allow whitewater boating on that portion of the river.

"Since we started this process, our priorities have been transparency and public input," said Paul Bradley, forest supervisor for the Francis Marion and Sumter National Forests. "Although we were not required to provide a comment period, we wanted to give people an opportunity to review the document. Now people have told us they need more time to look at our analysis and our preferred alternative, and we're responding by giving the public 15 more days."

The most recent alternative issued by the Forest Service would build a new one mile access trail into the last remaining reach of the Chattooga Wild and Scenic Corridor where developed access is limited.

The most recent environmental assessment, released by the Forest Service on July 15, revealed that the agency would build the new access trail at the confluence of Green Creek and the Chattooga River between Highlands, N.C., and Cashiers, N.C.

"The Chattooga Conservancy is not opposed to boating below Bull Pen Bridge, six miles downstream, as long as the Forest Service restricts the number of boaters. We draw the line at Bull Pen Bridge, where we will not condone building new access trails in this area, which would be like shooting an arrow into the heart of the last remaining place in the river corridor where users can seek solitude and a true back country experience," said Buzz Williams, executive director of the Chattooga Conservancy.

The battle over this issue has gone on since 2001, with Forest Service findings being challenged by whitewater paddling special interest groups who have sued the Forest Service to force building new access into the area.

"The Forest Service has simply abandoned their obligation to consider a fair alternative, as put forth by the Chattooga Conservancy, that would allow boating in most of the upper reaches of the Chattooga River while protecting the last, small, untrammeled section of the river, where 70 percent of the rare plant and animal life exists in the entire river corridor," Williams said.

"We are ready to fight with every resource we can muster to garner public support for a reasonable, fair solution to this controversy that will allow boating in the headwaters with sufficient restrictions to protect the outstandingly remarkable values that caused Congress to designate the Chattooga River as a National Wild and Scenic River," Williams said.