

Special Meeting – November 12, 2015

The Graham County Board of Commissioners met Thursday, November 12, 2015 at 7:00 p.m. in the Graham County Community Building located at 196 Knight Street Robbinsville, NC for a special meeting to discuss the proposed Wilderness Evaluation Process for the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests. All board was present.

1. Commissioner Eller called the meeting to order.
2. Commissioner Eller asks for approval of the agenda. Commissioner Williams made the motion to approve the agenda. Commissioner Nelms seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.
3. Commissioner Williams asks Mickey Stewart to give the Invocation.
4. Commissioner Eller stated that the reason for the meeting is to discuss the proposals of a new plan that contains designations of extra wilderness area in our county. Commissioner Eller stated that the board signed a resolution in 2013 stating that they did not want any more wilderness in this county. Commissioner Williams stated that the board learned of a meeting that was held in Franklin, NC on Monday night where the US Forest Service gave an update on what they were doing and as far as he knew there hasn't been a meeting held in Graham County. Commissioner Williams stated that he did not have anything against kayakers or hikers but Graham County did not need nor want any more wilderness. Commissioner Williams stated that Jesse Helms dealt with this forty (40) years ago and stopped the wilderness project then and we needed to unite and get this proposal stopped now. Commissioner Williams stated that the board will get petitions out and we need these signed and sent back so that they can be sent to Congressman Meadows Office with a letter from the Graham County Board of Commissioners. Commissioner Williams stated that this meeting needed to be kept orderly and questions can be asked throughout the meeting. Commissioner Eller asks Andy Cable, EDC Director to speak.
5. Andy Cable stated that he had looked at the maps and the proposed plan and the US Forest Service is recommending additional land to be added to Graham County Wilderness and we are not for that and whatever action is needed the board of commissioners will do. Mr. Cable stated that the board passed a resolution in 2013 that they did not want nor did they approve of more wilderness in our county. Mr. Cable stated that he would be attending another meeting in Asheville on November 16, 2015 and would oppose the proposed plan. Mr. Cable stated that the Forest Service will tell us that this is a process that they are required to do and the land cannot be put into wilderness without approval by Congress. Mr. Cable stated that the people of the county needed to be aware of where the proposed extra wilderness is at and further stated that this will impact our logging industry and our streams. Mr. Cable stated that we needed to have one united voice and make sure that our voice is heard with our demands. Mr. Cable stated that we do not want any more wilderness designations nor any wild or scenic river designations in our county.
6. Walter Hooper a member in the audience asks if the Forest Service started this or was it the Sierra Club pushing this.
7. Michelle Aldridge, a Forest Service employee stated that they are required to do a Forest Service Plan Revision Process and these are things that they look at in developing the plan. Ms. Aldridge stated that this is only at the beginning stages and they are nowhere near the final stage of the process. Walter Hooper asks again if this is within the Forest Service itself or is this being done by the Sierra Club. Commissioner Nelms asks if this was recommended by clubs or where did the process originate from. Angela Gee, Forest Ranger stated that the directives to do this plan is in place by Congress and we are required to lay out the criteria to make up the inventory of lands. Walter Hooper stated again, is this something that the forest service is doing or is it a club. Walter Hooper stated that we are told we can't dig ginseng so we don't dig it but he would like to be able to talk to people who are not educated fools. Commissioner Williams stated that we needed to speak in a proper way. Walter Hooper stated that he was borne in the sticks. Mr. Cable stated that Angela Gee and Michelle Aldridge did not have to be here tonight that they did us a courtesy by attending tonight's meeting and further stated that he would attend the next meeting in Asheville. Andy Cable stated that support for the plan will come from various clubs and we need our voice heard that we are not in favor of any more wilderness. Angela Gee stated that they are required to do this plan. Commissioner Williams asks how they get the time to do plans when they can't keep the bathrooms on forest service property clean. Ms. Gee stated that this revision is a mandate and it spells out how the forest service will manage the lands and they

do have a very limited budget. Ms. Gee stated that she would be glad to answer any questions and she understands the frustrations about wilderness and now is the time to get the counties input during the process and your input is very valuable to us. Commissioner Williams stated that the majority of people in the county want the land as is or even take out the wilderness that already exists. Walter Hooper asks that the forest service just leave us alone. Commissioner Williams stated that the forest service takes more and restricts more and it's hard to deal with and we only learned of these meetings on Monday night of this week.

8. Chairman Eller asks when the process will be completed. Ms. Gee stated that the timeline for completion is December 2017. Commissioner Orr asks how often this is reviewed. Ms. Gee stated that this is done every 15 years and the last one was completed in 1994. Commissioner Williams asks why the meeting was held in Franklin and not in our county. Ms. Gee stated that this process is for all of the Nantahala and Pisgah Forests and they felt a central location was more feasible. Ms. Gee stated that she is happy to be here tonight to take questions and she did send out notice of the meetings. Ms. Gee stated that this is only one piece of the inventory of lands and this is a four step process with step two just starting. Michelle Aldridge stated that step 4 is where the recommendations will be taken. Ms. Gee stated that currently on the maps is an inventory of areas not recommendations and the areas that would be affected are those that meet certain criteria and this will have to be evaluated. Ms. Aldridge stated that there are areas that will not make it thru the required steps and they had to look at the whole forest. Ms. Aldridge stated that the areas they are looking at are: Apparent Naturalness; Outstanding opportunities for solitude or for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; Stand alone area of less than 5,000 acres that is not adjacent to existing wilderness or administratively recommended wilderness; Unique and outstanding qualities; and Management. Ms. Aldridge stated that the recommendations from the above list will be submitted to Congress for approval and they can reject or accept. Commissioner Orr asks if the revised plan required a Congressional vote. Ms. Aldridge stated that an Act from Congress must be made based on the recommendations submitted.
9. Commissioner Williams stated that if we sit quietly and say nothing, then they could take our lands and this is why we need to stand united. Commissioner Orr asks if the land is pulled out will the county stop receiving PILT payments for this acreage. Ms. Gee stated that she did not know the answer to that question but would find it out.
10. Commissioner Nelms asks what kind of management would be for wilderness. Ms. Aldridge stated that it would differ from no motorized vehicles or boating. Commissioner Nelms stated that we are already restricted by the closed roads.
11. Rodney Carringer, a member in the audience asks what goal percentage the forest service was looking for, 10%, 20% and if I break a bush in the wilderness area will I be put in jail. Mr. Carringer stated that the people's concern is that if you give an inch the forest service will take a mile. Mr. Carringer asks if a person kills a rattlesnake what would happen and further stated that we were once allowed to dig ginseng and now only seven to 10 permits are issued in the county.
12. Commissioner Nelms stated that if you designate some of the property that is on the map you will destroy our access to the watershed. Ms. Gee stated that this is the type of information that they needed and please fill out the forms because of these reasons.
13. Joe Waldroup, a member in the audience stated that he was 67 years old and when he was a kid they could ride and play on any of the forest service roads but now they have gates across them and according to your plan these roads will be counted as non-use and this is not fair when you make areas to fit your criteria. Mr. Waldroup stated that people in this county take care of the lands and we make our living digging ginseng, mossing and cutting timber but you are wanting to completely stop all that. Mr. Waldroup stated that we deserve a say so on our lands. Mr. Waldroup stated that the forest service used to make money with the timber sales and now the roads that was once logged is gated and can't be used and that timber grew back. Ms. Gee stated that there are more roads closed than there were twenty years ago.
14. Steve Odom, a member in the audience stated that he has a letter from Congressman Meadows office and he will help us fight this and we are taking petitions across the county and having them signed to stop the wilderness. Mr. Odom stated that this will be a long drawn out battle but the county would have to fight to keep our lands. Mr. Odom stated that is also a process to designate our streams as wild and scenic rivers and if this goes through it will prohibit recreation and sportsman use on these lands. Ms. Gee stated that there are 53 rivers that are being evaluated to see if they meet the criteria of wild and scenic rivers but they are only being

studied. Mr. Odom asks how many streams are there in Graham County. Ms. Gee stated that there are 6 or 8 in this county.

15. Commissioner Nelms stated that there will be implications if our streams are designated as wild and scenic. Michelle Aldridge stated that the evaluation is if there is outstanding vegetation management. Commissioner Nelms stated that you would not be allowed to cut trees. Ms. Aldridge stated that nothing could be done that would harm the features and this is only on forest service lands. Mr. Nelms asks which streams are being considered. Ms. Gee stated that Little Santeetlah Creek; Santeetlah Creek; Cheoah River; Long Creek; Sassafras and Slickrock Creeks. Commissioner Nelms asks about the buffer. Ms. Gee stated that you could not harm or degrade anything within one mile on each sides. Commissioner Nelms stated that this would affect building bridges. Ms. Gee stated not necessarily but it would restrict dams.
16. Commissioner Williams stated that if Long Creek is added this will cut off the water supply to the Town of Robbinsville. Mr. Odom asks if the entire Long Creek would be added. Ms. Gee stated no that only certain sections that was classified as being so outstanding that is was better than any other in the region. Commissioner Orr asks if a stream can be grandfathered in such as the one where our town water supply is located. Ms. Gee stated that it would hold strength for a municipality but this is not an exclusion.
17. Commissioner Eller asks Andy Cable to read the letter from the Carolina Public Press. Mr. Cable stated that we needed to fill out the questionnaire by the forest service and he realizes that not everyone can get access to computers but if anyone needed assistance they can come to our offices to make sure that we bring one voice on the input of this process.
18. Roma Gail Collins, a member in the audience stated that she understood that several counties was involved and there has not been a lot of positive comments and wanted to know if this would make a difference to the plan. Ms. Gee stated that yes it will make a difference and she is in a neutral position where wilderness is concerned but the forest service mission statements had to be followed.
19. Commissioner Williams stated that they would listen to ten tree huggers before they would talk to this crowd and other states should not have a say in the proposed wilderness for this county.
20. Commissioner Orr asks how the forest service comes up with the criteria. Ms. Aldridge stated that there are steps for all the plans of the forest service and they have to be reviewed.
21. Commissioner Williams asks Ms. Aldridge if she sits in an office or has she been to the sites. Ms. Gee stated that Ms. Aldridge relied on her and her staff to obtain the data.
22. Joe Waldroup stated that Slickrock and Joyce Kilmer are already in the wilderness and we didn't need any more and asks how big a buffer zone is around this area. Ms. Gee stated that we don't have buffer zones but we manage designated wilderness and other inventory areas that have criteria that dictate these areas.
23. Commissioner Nelms asks if the recommendation could be none for Graham County. Ms. Aldridge stated that zero is within the range and if people are telling us zero then they will listen. Ms. Aldridge stated that we will listen to Graham County and this input does make a difference.
24. Commissioner Nelms stated that the forest plan should not be a voting process but should be done by the peoples input but as you know we are outnumbered by the various clubs and asks if they can detect mass mailing and exclude this from the vote. Ms. Gee stated that the process is open to all public.
25. Bo Collins, a member in the audience stated that we are outnumbered and wanted to know whose input they would consider, someone from our county or the people from the outside because everything that involves our county should be decided by our people.
26. Ms. Gee stated that she hears and understands and wanted the input from the local citizens but the process is open to all public.
27. Jack Gross, a member in the audience asks if we form a committee to pass information back and forth to the forest service would be forthcoming.
28. Steve Odom stated that he wanted to see the score of the input from local people versus the number from outside the county.
29. Greg Cable, a member in the audience thanked Ms. Gee and Ms. Aldridge for coming to the meeting and letting us be a part of the planning process but out of the 11,000 emails that was sent out how many of those were in this county. Mr. Cable stated that the potential designated land scares a lot of us and we need to be kept informed of the upcoming meetings.
30. Commissioner Cody asks how many people attended the meeting in Franklin and the reply was 100. Commissioner Cody stated that there are nearly that amount here tonight and they are all

from Graham County and this was by word of mouth since Monday evening. Commissioner Cody stated that we need to be united and stand up for our rights.

31. Andy Cable stated that according to the Carolina Public Press there was a potential increase of 364,000 acres of land in the inventory and the county needed to get the word out to complete the surveys. Mr. Cable stated that this is double the amount of land that was discussed in 2014 and all or some of the inventory will be wild and scenic rivers and wilderness which will cause the lands to be unusable. Mr. Cable stated that he will attend the meeting that is to be held in Asheville on November 16, 2015 at 6:00 p.m. and encourages everyone that could to attend. Mr. Cable stated that the only persons who would be allowed to use the lands would be hikers and this is just another way that the forest service is stealing our land and working resources. Mr. Cable stated that hunting, fishing and other recreational activities will be affected as well and in his personal opinion he did not want any more restrictions and we want to live with what we have.
32. Roma Collins stated that sportsman pay for the right to hunt and the forest service needs to charge the hikers for hiking the lands. Commissioner Williams stated that everyone should be treated equal and the hunters are not.
33. Scott Cunningham stated that when the road to Big Fat Gap was closed due to road routing congress was contacted and the forest service had to fix the road and reopen it and it's the same with game lands, we have a right to access our lands.
34. Carl Green stated that the county was studied years ago by a gentleman and he wondered where he was at today. Ms. Aldridge stated that the recommendations were being used. Mr. Green stated that this can all be studied but until congress puts the lands into wilderness it will always be a study area.
35. Jimmy Millsaps, a member in the audience stated that we are put on notice until 2017 and we should have already known about this and he was like everyone else, no more wilderness, but we have to deal with this by their criteria and tell them why we don't want any more wilderness. Mr. Millsaps stated that we should have been notified of this revision plan and it has been ignored but we needed to get involved in the forest plan. Mr. Millsaps stated that we are owned by the forest service by 70% and we are the ones that spend money in this county, the tree huggers do not spend one dime. Mr. Millsaps stated that we needed to pass a resolution to have someone talking for us and tell them what we want in the plan. Mr. Millsaps asks how we meet the criteria of solitude when we are the pass by for McGee Tyson and Atlanta airports and if anyone doubts that just look in the sky and you can constantly see the streaks that the planes make.
36. Ms. Gee stated that this is the earliest that the public could give input and this is much earlier than proposed and it is not too late for the county to give their recommendations. Ms. Aldridge stated that this is the same information that will be handed out at the Asheville meeting and all will be told to send in their input.
37. Commissioner Cody asks if there will be public comment at the Asheville meeting. Ms. Gee stated that they would not allow public comment the way we have done here tonight. Ms. Aldridge stated that there would be no microphones in the room.
38. Commissioner Williams thanked Ms. Gee and Ms. Aldridge for coming tonight. Mr. Jimmy Millsaps stated that we don't expect any more consideration just because we live here but this is our county and further stated that the questionnaire was difficult to answer and it would be tough for some residents to answer those questions but we will give you what you are looking for.
39. Steve Odom stated that we have been reactive and we needed to be proactive and this can't wait and urges everyone to get the information out to our citizens.
40. Commissioner Orr stated that her phone number was in the book if anyone had difficulty filling out the questionnaire and she would be glad to help.
41. The board asks that everyone sign the petition as well as filling out the required paperwork and get these forms back in.
42. Commissioner Nelms made the motion to adjourn. Commissioner Orr seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.

Signature page for Special Meeting – November 12, 2015

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Keith Eller, Chairman, Graham County Commissioner

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Jacob Nelms, Vice-Chairman, Graham County Commissioner

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Lynn Cody, Member, Graham County Commissioner

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Connie Orr, Member, Graham County Commissioner

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Raymond Williams, Member, Graham County Commissioner

ATTEST:

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Kim Crisp, Clerk to the Board