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Georgia ForestWatch & Wilderness Watch

Many conservation groups file comments to uphold boating ban on Upper Chattooga

Georgia ForestWatch and Wilderness Watch have filed detailed public comments urging the U.S. Forest Service to uphold the “zoning” that prohibits boating on the 21 miles of the Wild and Scenic Upper Chattooga River in Georgia and the Carolinas.

“This zoning has worked well to preserve the solitude and wilderness characteristics of a pristine river corridor for more than 35 years,” said Wayne Jenkins, the executive director of the ForestWatch conservation group, based in Ellijay, Georgia. “We see no reason to open it up for the sake of a few kayakers who already have rights to plenty of whitewater in this region.”

George Nickas, executive director of Wilderness Watch, said it was important to help protect the Ellicott Rock Wilderness in all three affected states. “We do not believe that adding yet another use to an already pressured wild area is an appropriate solution.”

The Forest Service has proposed opening 16.5 miles of these headwaters for three months of the year, and solicited public comment on those plans – the latest in a six-year analysis of the situation. The Agency’s plan would permit boating from Green Creek to Lick Log Creek, an area that bisects the sensitive Chattooga Cliffs area, Ellicott Rock Wilderness and Rock Gorge backcountry.

Other conservation groups also have filed similar comment letters, expressing serious reservation about the Forest Service plans. That list includes the Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club; Friends of Georgia; the Highlands (N.C.) Biological Station, an inter-

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institutional research field station of the University of North Carolina, and its affiliated Highlands Biological Foundation; and the Jackson-Macon Conservation Alliance, which covers the Chattooga headwaters in Highlands and Cashiers, N.C.

Simultaneously, Georgia ForestWatch filed a motion in U.S. District Court in Greenville, S.C. to intervene in a court suit brought by boating lobby groups to try to circumvent the Forest Service environmental analysis process and immediately open the 21 miles of affected headwaters.

ForestWatch and Wilderness Watch contend that it makes more sense to preserve the Upper Chattooga for the hikers, hunters, anglers, birders, picnickers, botanists and nature photographers who currently enjoy the solitude of one of the last quiet places in the Southern Appalachians. "The boater lobby hopes to reverse the agency's authority to manage or zone the very resources they are charged with," said Jenkins, "There is not enough river for everyone to do everything, everywhere and still have a Wild and Scenic River experience that includes solitude", he concluded,

The administrative comments were filed on behalf of Georgia ForestWatch and Wilderness Watch on a pro-bono basis by Susan Richardson of the Atlanta law firm, Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP. Alex Bullock of the Kilpatrick firm filed the court papers in Greenville.

For more information, or to secure copies of the comment letters, contact Jenkins, Gatins or Nickas at the coordinates above.

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The mission of Georgia ForestWatch is to promote management that leads to naturally self-sustaining forests and watersheds within the more than 865,000 acres of national forest lands in Georgia, to engage and educate the public to join in this effort, and to promote preservation of this legacy for future generations.