

Special Meeting – March 8, 2022

The Graham County Board of Commissioners met Tuesday, March 8, 2022, at 6:30 p.m. for a special meeting to have discussion with the Wildlife Commission regarding the United States Forest Plan. The meeting was held in the Graham County Community Building located at 196 Knight Street Robbinsville, NC. All board was present. Also present, Kyle Briggs, Chief Deputy Director Wildlife Management; Brian McRae, Deputy Director of Operations; Nick Shaffer, Mountain Ecoregion Supervisor; Ryan Jacobs, Wildlife Manager for Timber Sales, and Outreach Liaison; David Stewart, Biologist II; Hayden Rogers, Graham County Advocate; Forrest Gilliam, Graham County Advocate; Jason Marino, County Manager and Kim Crisp, Clerk to the Board of Commissioners.

1. Vice-Chairman Eller called the meeting to order.
2. Vice-Chairman Eller asks for approval of the agenda. Commissioner Nelms made the motion to approve the agenda. Commissioner Cody seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.
3. Vice-Chairman Eller welcomed Hayden Rogers, Forrest Gilliam, and the Wildlife Management Officials. After the introduction, Mr. Rogers thanked everyone for taking time to speak with them on the USFS Plan and wanted the Wildlife Agency to give an update on what they are doing, might be able to do, and just have conversation with the board.
4. Mr. Rogers stated that the forest can be challenging with the number of acres that are owned in our county by the USFS and the board had some concerns regarding the forest plan and the closing of the Cable Cove Campground, access points, timber management and felt this was a good opportunity for the Wildlife to give a review of what they can do to improve some situations and discuss the challenges that they are having such as timber management. Mr. Rogers stated that he believes that the county could partner with Wildlife to help the process of creating more habitat and discuss their plan in general.
5. Mr. Briggs stated that most of their work has been in the Pisgah Forest but hopes that they will be expanding into the Nantahala Forest. Mr. Shaffer stated that they have been meeting with some of the Forest District Rangers and proposed that they partner with them on some of the restoration projects. Mr. Shaffer stated that as part of the initiative they are working with the forest service on projects that have already gone through the NEPA process and for whatever reason did not get completed whether a lack of money or personnel, etc. Mr. Shaffer stated that the goal is to get these projects completed and they will have two new employees to be over these projects and are excited to try this in the Pisgah Forest and hopefully bring into the Nantahala Forest. Mr. Briggs stated that the forest service lacks the manpower to mark for timber sales and they hope to help them with that problem to have the capacity to get these marked and realizes that there is a backlog, and they are working hard to get the boots on the ground.
6. Mr. Stewart stated that the county was lucky to have the new District Ranger Andy Gaston on board and he was willing to build a relationship with them and had reached out to them for discussion and they did find several project locations that would be beneficial to the county.
7. Vice-Chairman Eller stated that a relationship with the proposed improvements would be good with the board.
8. Mr. Shaffer stated that the Crossover Project which is located at the Graham / Cherokee line is in the scoping process and should go to comment in April and that project will have around 2162 acres of timber harvest and 1557 acres are commercial work which should be a large project for the loggers. Mr. Shaffer stated that another area being looked at is in the Yellow Creek/Cable Cove area between the two lakes that was identified years ago as areas that needed work done for our different species of animals and this property contained five out of six of the animals such as grouse, deer, turkey, golden leaf warbler and the cerulean warbler and this will be a great place to do restoration work. Mr. Shaffer stated that this is a process and they have an active role in Graham County and all over the Nantahala /Pisgah Forest but these were the areas that were important for focus management and stated that their program is called WHAMA (Wildlife Habitat Active Management Area) and the intent is to facilitate improved habitat conditions for elk, deer, turkey and rough grouse for heard management and they believe that it will be best achieved through partnership between the Forest Service and the NC Wildlife Commissioner.
9. Commissioner Wiggins stated that there are many local people here that would donate time to see that this restoration happens and have in fact worked on projects with the forest service on existing trails that was overgrown. Mr. Briggs stated that they needed to get in touch with David Whitmire from Wildlife and communicate the names of the organizational groups, people with equipment and volunteers. Chair Orr asks if the WHAMA project has identified five to seven areas in Graham County. Mr. Briggs stated yes that is correct.

10. Mr. Rogers stated that the forest service has more land than resources and asks the board if there are any areas of concern they may have regarding closed roads or specific areas or areas that have been assigned specific guidelines for management. Mr. Rogers stated that the forest service has 1.1 million acres of land with very limited staff and the wildlife is trying to assist as much as possible with a team effort and our habitat is very important to us and our residents.
11. Mr. Briggs stated that they have been working on some roads and trails in the county. Commissioner Eller stated that this is information that the board did not have and thanked the commission for partnering with the forest service. Mr. Briggs stated that they have been helping with maintenance on roads and providing funding for the work to get improved roads and asks the board to identify any areas or roads that are in bad need of maintenance.
12. Mr. Jacobs stated that in 2016-2017 they upgraded 4 miles in the slickrock area; 2019-2020 they upgraded 23 miles in the Tatham Gap, Long Hungry and Slickrock areas and in 2021-2022 they will and/or have 4.9 miles in the Snowbird, Blue Boar area so they have done a good bit of work in Graham County already.
13. Vice-Chairman Eller stated that he did not know that Wildlife did any of that work. Commissioner Wiggins stated that we learn new things every day. Commissioner Wiggins asks if the commission is assisting with the slide area at Blue Boar. Mr. Jacobs stated that they have only put this out to bid so he has not talked to them about the specifics at this time. Commissioner Wiggins asks if the commission could assist with the repairs needed in the Cable Cove Campground. Mr. McRae stated that they only work on property that will assist with our sportsman's and wildlife habitat, but he would discuss this issue with the forest service. Commissioner Wiggins stated that the restrooms are a challenge and how the land and infrastructure lay. Commissioner Wiggins asks if the commission is planning to hire additional personnel to patrol the forest. Mr. Briggs stated that they would like to add more employees, but it is determined by the budget and unfortunately it takes money to add staff. Mr. Briggs stated that they have added eight new positions in a twelve-year period, and they are having discussions around more personnel.
14. Mr. Rogers stated that the legislature is in control of the funding, and they will continue to encourage them for more funding. Commissioner Wiggins stated that they have most of the lands now in Graham County and we hate to see these lands not being maintained because they do not have the proper staff or budget and they do not pay enough in taxes, and they are not supplying the funding for habitat resources nor for enforcement. Commissioner Wiggins stated that he hopes they will see the challenges that Graham County is facing.
15. Mr. Rogers stated that the board will be objecting to the new forest plan and thanks the commission for speaking with board. Chair Orr thanked Hayden Rogers and Forest Gilliam for attending the meeting and asks for a motion to adjourn. Commissioner Nelms made the motion to adjourn. Commissioner Wiggins seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.

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Connie Orr, Chair

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Keith Eller, Vice-Chairman

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Lynn Cody, Member

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Jacob Nelms, Member

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Dale Wiggins, Member

ATTEST

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Kim Crisp, Clerk to the Board