

eCAP Helps Stakeholders Zero in on Restoration



The Steering Committee focused on nine ecological systems, including pine-oak woodlands (pictured here). The Forest Service is restoring this site using controlled burns. (c) Josh Kelly

Cherokee National Forest Supervisor Tom Speaks was frustrated and his staff was frustrated. Before Speaks took the helm, it had taken about a decade to revise the Cherokee’s Forest Plan. Years of planning had taken its toll on interested community members and groups, most of which disengaged before the Plan was completed. Then, after five years implementing the Plan, monitoring data indicated that the Forest Service was not meeting its objectives for forest restoration. “We were falling way short in a number of areas,” says Speaks. To make matters worse, some stakeholders who had worked on the Plan were unhappy with how the Plan was being implemented--so unhappy that they had appealed some timber sales.

Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS ■

Geoff Call, US Fish and Wildlife Service
Dennis Daniel, National Wild Turkey Federation
John Gregory, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency
Steve Henson, Southern Appalachian Multiple Use Council
Josh Kelly, Member at Large
Dwight King, Volunteer Logging
Joe McGuinness, Cherokee National Forest
Katherine Medlock, The Nature Conservancy
Catherine Murray, Cherokee Forest Voices
Steve Novak, Wildlaw (Until May 31st, 2011)
Danny Osborne, Tennessee Dept of Agriculture, Division of Forestry
Terry Porter, Tennessee Forestry Association
Mark Shelley, Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition
Parker Street, Ruffed Grouse Society

LOCATION ■ Eastern Tennessee, near the southern terminus of the Appalachian Mountains

AREA ■ 340,000 acres

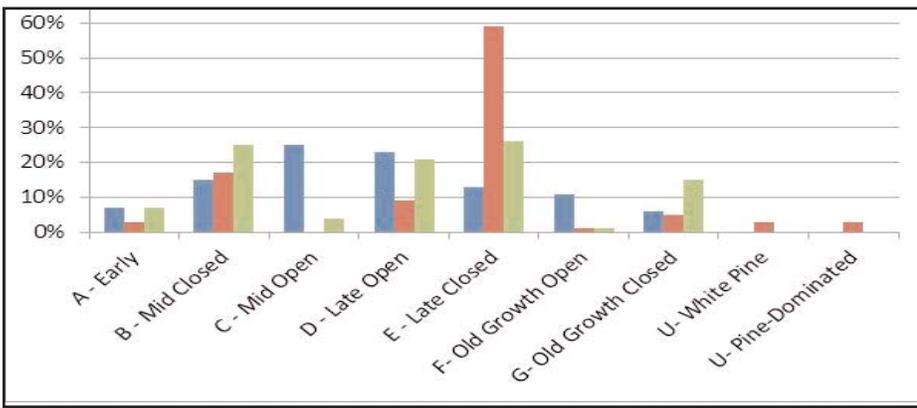
FOR MORE INFORMATION ■

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Speaks realized that the Forest needed both a new approach to restoration, and a way to bring disparate interests together to find common ground so that USFS could effectively implement the new approach.

Coming Together for the Good of the Forest

Located in eastern Tennessee, near the southern terminus of the Appalachian Mountains, the Cherokee National Forest is divided into north and south zones that are separated by Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The Forest contains remarkable biodiversity and is an important recreation asset as well as the source of abundant, clean water for the region’s towns and cities.



Percentages of the different “classes” of Dry-Mesic Oak Forest on the North Zone of the Cherokee National Forest. Blue bars represent the Natural Range of Variation; red bars represent the current condition; green bars depict the results of implementing the U-B-Gone management scenario for 50 years. (White Pine and Pine-Dominated classes are uncharacteristic, meaning they did not exist in the pre-European settlement condition of this ecological system. Models show that the chosen management regimen eliminates these classes over time.)

The Nature Conservancy’s Katherine Medlock worked with Speaks and his staff to convene the 13-member group that came to be known as the **Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative Steering Committee**. Speaks had already developed relationships with all the local and state agencies and interest groups in the area, and he knew that some held very different, even diametrical, opinions about how the Cherokee should be managed. At the same time, says Speaks, “each and every one of them is passionate about the Forest, and things had gotten pretty bad. Doing nothing wasn’t an option. But I’ll tell you this, you can’t do something like this without the relationships.”

The Committee’s charge was to engage the public and to develop economically feasible management recommendations for the 340,000-acre North Zone of the Cherokee National Forest. “A lot of people aren’t comfortable with true collaborations like this. And it was quite a risk. I knew the Forest Service couldn’t lead the effort,” says Speaks. “We couldn’t dominate the process. And we had to trust the group to develop a plan that made sense.”

A few months after she and Speaks launched the Committee, Medlock got wind of a new planning process that Conservancy staffers Greg Low, Louis Provencher and others were using in the western U.S. The process, known as Enhanced Conservation Action Planning

(eCAP), had shown promise as a scientifically credible way to: (1) assess the current condition of a given area, and (2) engage stakeholders in evaluating alternative management scenarios. eCAP appealed to Medlock, an ecologist, because it seemed like an opportunity to combine science, local knowledge and collaboration.

Developing a Common Vocabulary

As it turned out, a major flaw of the Cherokee Forest Plan was that it didn’t clearly define “restoration.” In the southern Appalachians there are few if any examples of successful landscape-scale forest restoration, and consequently, people have different ideas about what a restored montane pine forest or cove forest ought to look like. The eCAP process and the LANDFIRE models and data that it uses helped the Committee define in a more precise way what a restored state would look like for each of the nine ecological systems they decided to focus on. Restoration, the Committee decided, meant bringing an ecosystem’s current or projected future condition more in line with its pre-European settlement condition (described by a LANDFIRE metric called Natural Range of Variation).

To assess the current condition of the Forest’s ecosystems, the Committee worked with ecologist Steve Simon, who “localized” LANDFIRE maps. For each focal ecosystem, the Committee compared the current condition to the LANDFIRE

Natural Range of Variation and obtained a number that represented the system’s degree of departure.

Consensus

Next the group worked with the Forest to define and model the on-the-ground outcomes of a suite of potential management actions. Future forest conditions were forecast over 20 and 50 years and the results compared to a “no management” scenario. Then a cost-benefit analysis was conducted that resulted in the group recommending that the Forest Service implement a management regimen they dubbed “U-B-Gone” because it was focused on reducing uncharacteristic (U) ecosystem types. Due to its relatively low cost and effectiveness, the U-B-Gone scenario emphasizes controlled burning, in addition to harvesting, thinning and some planting. The cost of implementing this scenario is in line with what the Forest Service spends today.

Although the Committee’s recommendations are still in draft form, Speaks is pleased with the group’s efforts. “We’re going to be able to act on some of these recommendations right away. Also, the collaborative nature of this work will help the Forest garner more funding for management. In the longer term, with a high-functioning collaborative in place, we’re really well-positioned to revise our Forest Plan, and it should only take a year this time.”

According to Medlock, this project had several key ingredients for success: a Committee whose make-up included members of all the main local constituencies who were deeply committed to the project, a process that engaged the Committee in examining both the forest’s restoration needs and a suite of management regimens that could be used to meet those needs, and trusted science (via LANDFIRE and the FLN).

Medlock credits the **Southern Blue Ridge Fire Learning Network** with connecting her with scientific experts who were essential to the project’s success, and with providing valuable peer feedback at FLN workshops. Medlock says, “We leaned so heavily on the Network.... it was an incredible resource that I could go back to again and again.”



The U.S. Fire Learning Network — a cooperative project of the USDA Forest Service, U.S. Department of the Interior and The Nature Conservancy — was created in 2002 to accelerate the restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems, those places where fire has been an essential natural process for centuries. The Network promotes learning and innovation among communities, public land managers and conservation practitioners around the country.