

US Forest Service Update

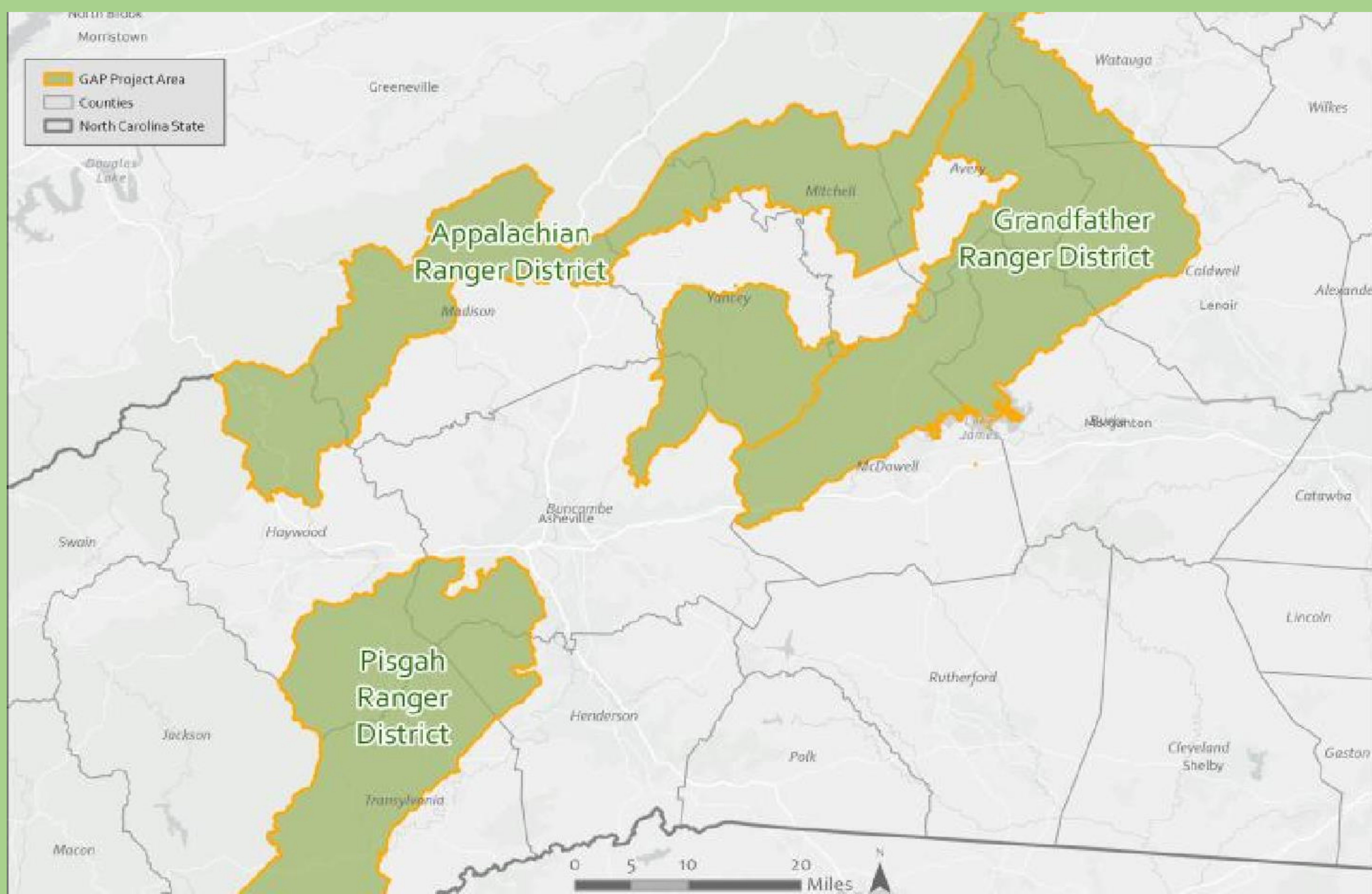
Pisgah National Forest

Jen Barnhart, District Ranger, Appalachian Ranger District



- GAP Restoration Project
- Tropical Storm Fred Impacts & Repairs





What is GAP?

The **Grandfather, Appalachian, and Pisgah (GAP) Restoration Project** proposes actions to *restore fire-adapted sections of Pisgah National Forest and reduce wildfire risk to resources and nearby communities.*

The GAP Project's proposed actions include controlled burns and vegetation management to modify fuels and support resilient, native ecosystems.

The proposed actions are limited to areas of the forest that are considered high risk for wildfire activity and impacts, based on data gathered and analyzed by The Nature Conservancy and U.S. Forest Service specialists in consultation with the National Park Service and other partners.





Process Timeline

Proposal Development

Early Public Input

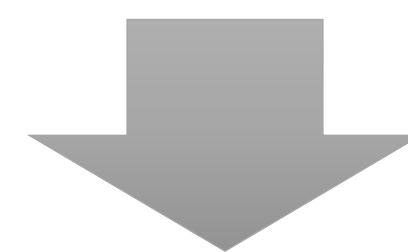


Proposal Development

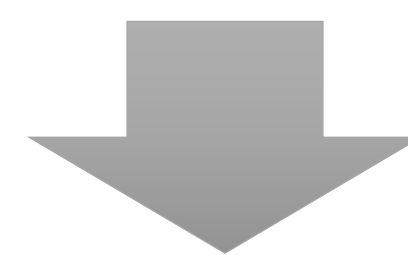


National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Process*

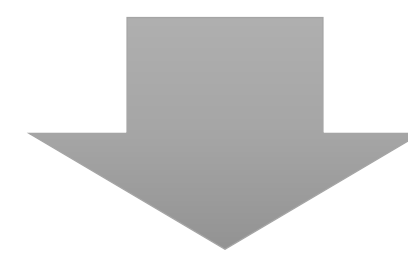
Public Scoping Period



Identification of Issues and Alternatives



Additional Effects Analysis



Publish Draft EA and 30-Day Comment Period



Publish Final EA and Draft Decision Notice



Objection Period



Publish Final Decision Notice



*The Environmental Assessment process is shown for reference. Some or all future proposals may be addressed through other processes.

The draft environmental analysis for the GAP Restoration Project opened for a 30- day public comment period on July 12, 2024.

During that period, anyone may comment on the project to help develop the proposed actions and identify issues that should be addressed through the environmental analysis process.

Submitting Comments

The input you and others provide during the 30-day comment period (starting July 12, 2024) will help the U.S. Forest Service and our partners refine this project. We read and consider all comments and identify key issues for consideration to help inform our environmental analysis. For more information on the comment process, and/or to comment on the GAP project, please visit the project website: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=62992>. You can access the comment form by clicking on “**Comment on Project**” on the right-hand side.

To learn more please go to the GAP Restoration Project Story Map:
<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/792662ebdf964d6fbe8a20ecd8ee6093>



The draft environmental assessment identifies 107 pieces of land, with a median size of less than 1400 acres, that will undergo a process of field reviews/verification before any action is taken

Wildfire: A landscape-level challenge

Fire history studies show that dry, pine and oak-dominant sites in the southern Blue Ridge Mountains burned, on average, every 5-7 years. Wetter, or more *mesic*, sites also burned regularly, with fire frequency averages around every 10-15 years. Throughout the last century, we've seen a trend towards longer, more severe dry periods and many of our forests have undergone a period of fire exclusion, disrupting their natural disturbance cycle. Combined, **these factors have led to an unprecedented build-up of fuel for wildfires and less resilient forests.**

The human population growth and interest in western North Carolina means **there is a higher likelihood of human-caused fire ignition and higher risk to visitors and local communities if a wildfire starts.**

Some people believe wildfire is an issue only in the western U.S., but during drought conditions in 2016, there were 383 wildfires in western NC that burned more than 63,000 acres.

More recently, dry conditions in the fall of 2023 contributed to several large fires on our National Forests and across the region, including the 2,000-acre Black Bear Fire on the Appalachian Ranger District, which burned close to I-40, affecting visitors and local communities.





United States Department of Agriculture

Collaboration: Landscape Level Solution

Maintaining healthy forests and keeping communities safe means working across boundaries. The U.S. Forest Service has been working with state and federal agencies, private landowners, and non-profits to identify shared goals and take what we call an "all-lands approach". We've developed the priorities, Areas of Interest (AOIs), and targeted treatments in the GAP Project through a collaborative partnership called the Pisgah Restoration Initiative (PRI).

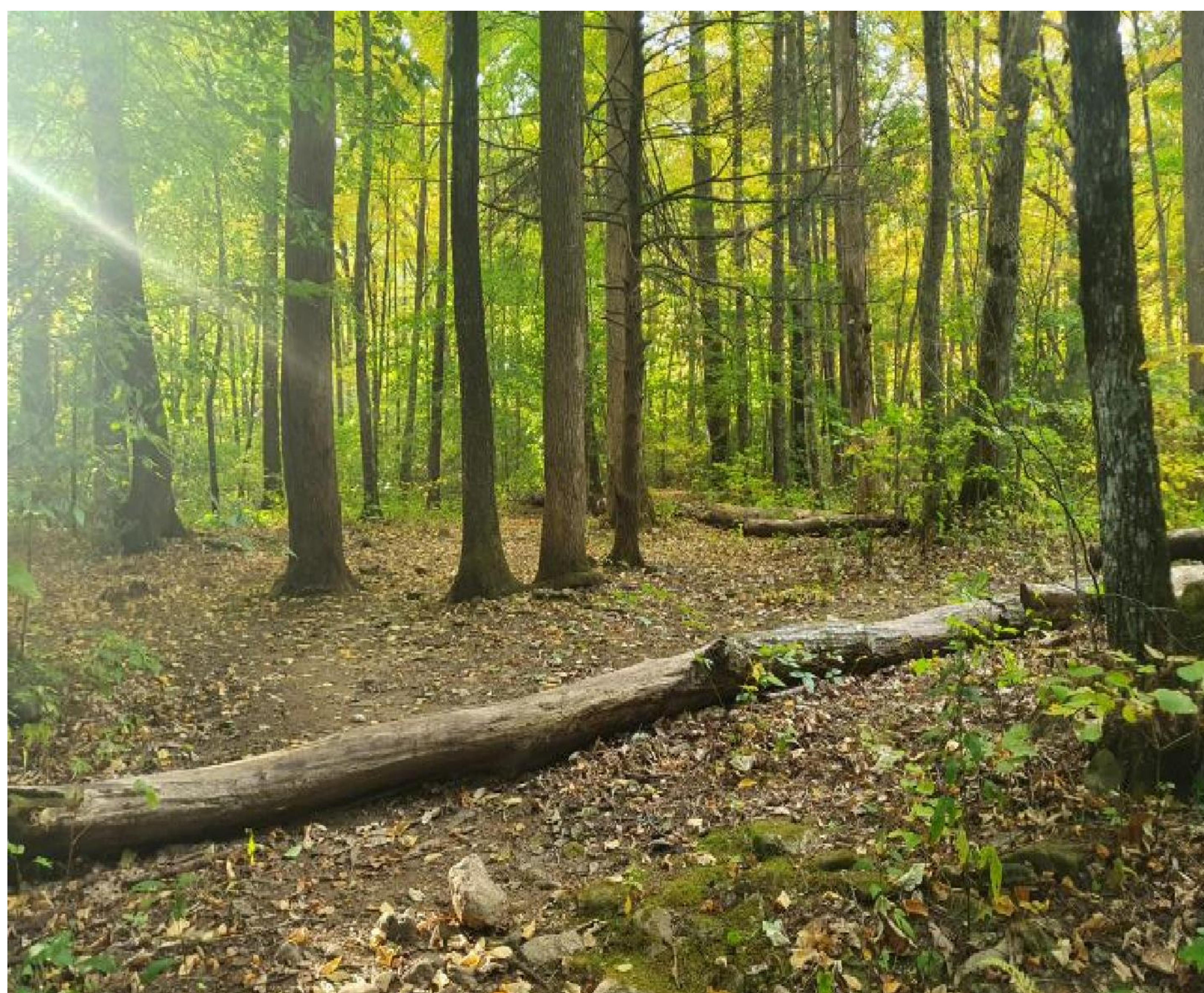


Pisgah Restoration Initiative

PRI includes individuals, non-profit organizations, state, local, and federal agencies. They received funding through the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program and plan to work together over the next 10 years.

The GAP Project has also been an opportunity for co-stewardship with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) on their ancestral homelands. EBCI has been involved since the early stages of the project, incorporating Traditional Ecological Knowledge into the Proposed Action.

Scientists from the Southern Research station have also been involved in the GAP project to ensure we use the best science available and that we are improving forest health with adaptive management techniques.

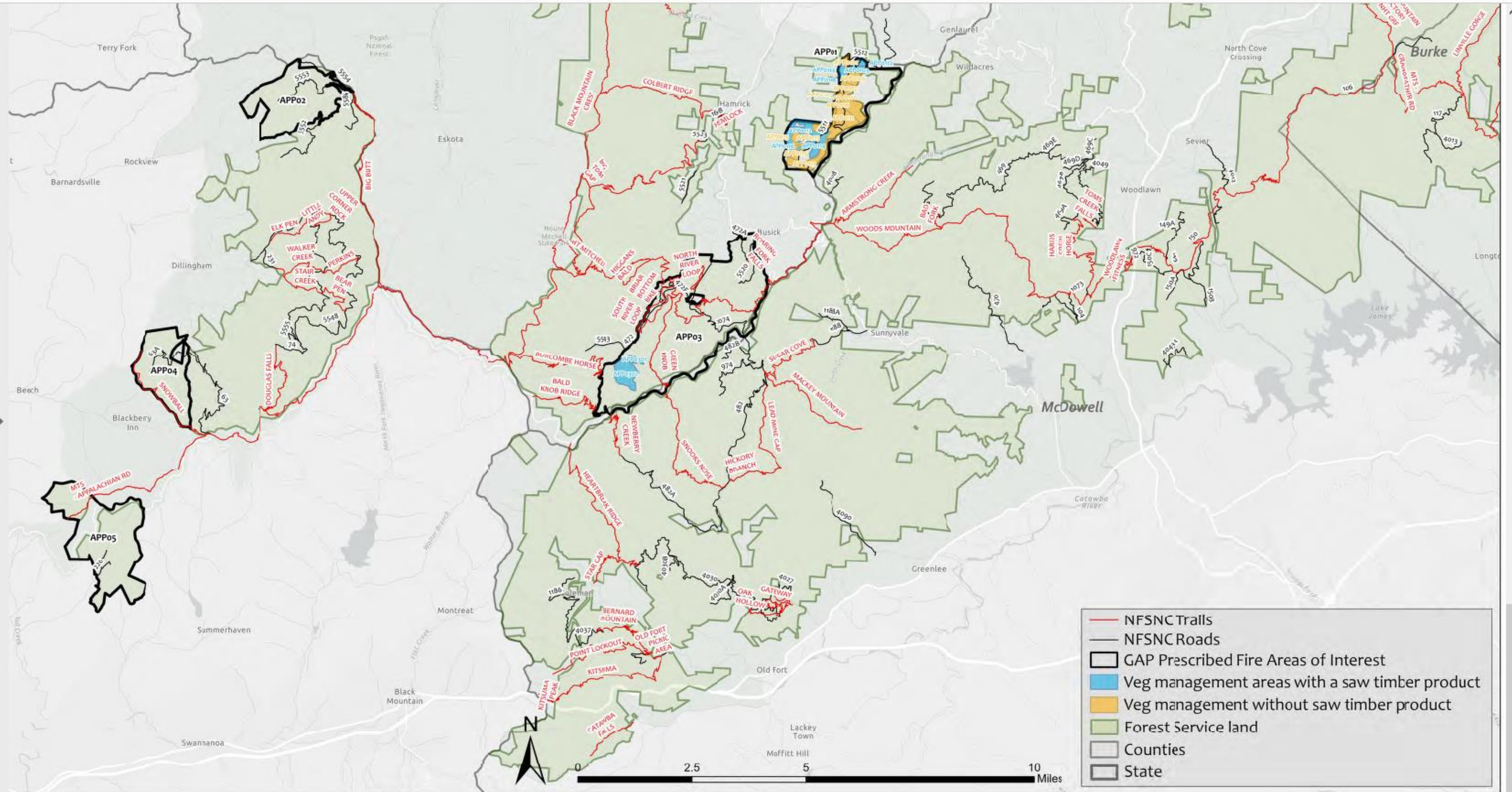


Proposed Actions

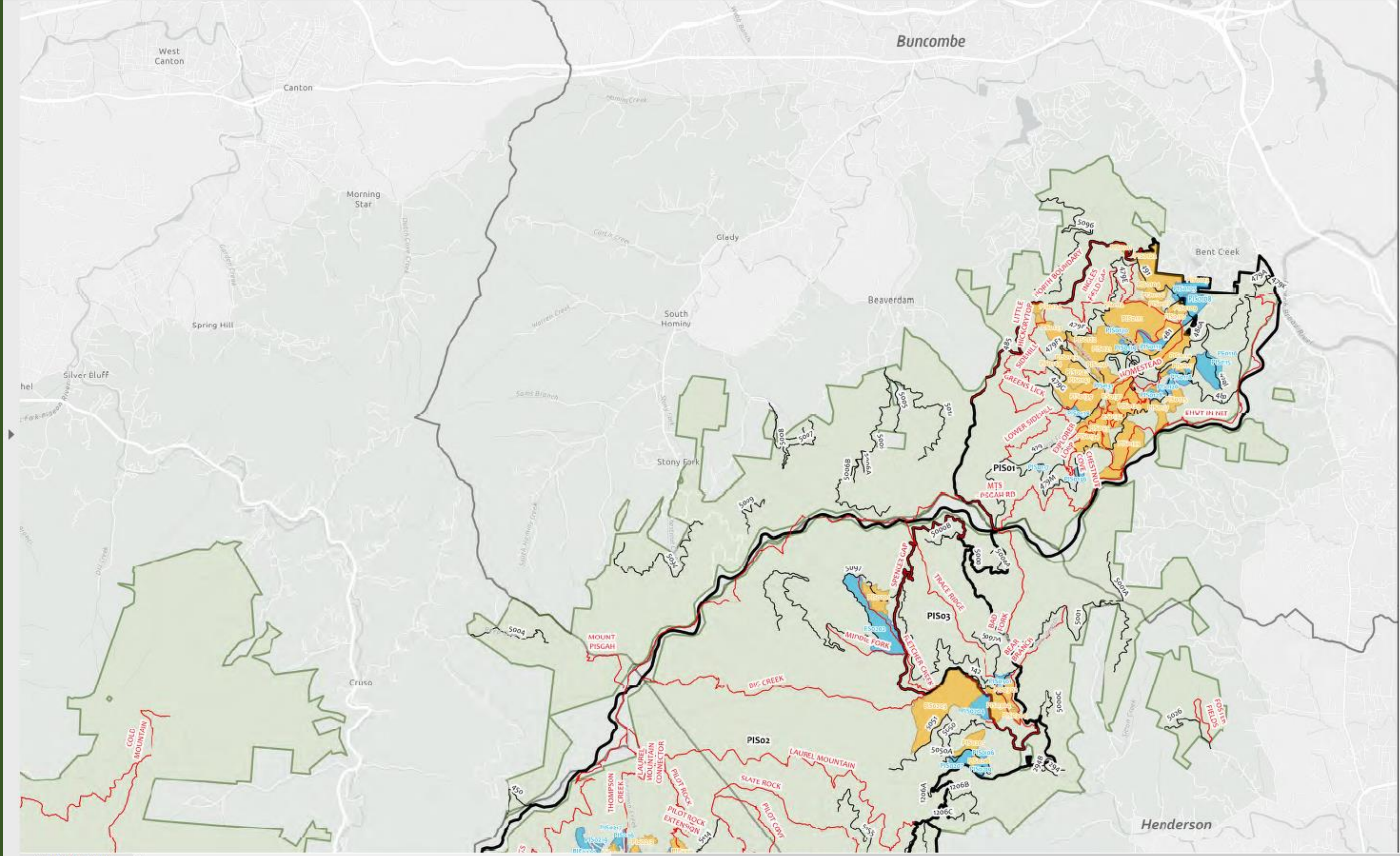
Working collaboratively is a key concept in the Forest Plan that was finalized in 2023. Through working with partners and the Pisgah Restoration Initiative, we've identified the following needs that the GAP Project addresses:

- **Forest restoration through improving species composition, ecological processes, function, and structure. This includes recruiting native, fire-adapted species (e.g., oak, hickory and southern yellow pine) in areas of the forest where they should be supported.**
- **Reduce intensity of wildfire by restoring and maintaining open forest or woodland structure in our most fire-adapted areas (i.e., Shortleaf Pine-Oak, Pine-Oak Heath, and Dry Oak, Dry-Mesic Oak stands).**
- **Improve species health and increase regeneration of under-represented species in more mesic fire-adapted forests (High Elevation Red Oak and Mesic Oak Ecozones).**
- **Coordinate with local, state, federal, and non-government organizations to support private landowners and local communities in meeting their wildfire risk reduction goals.**

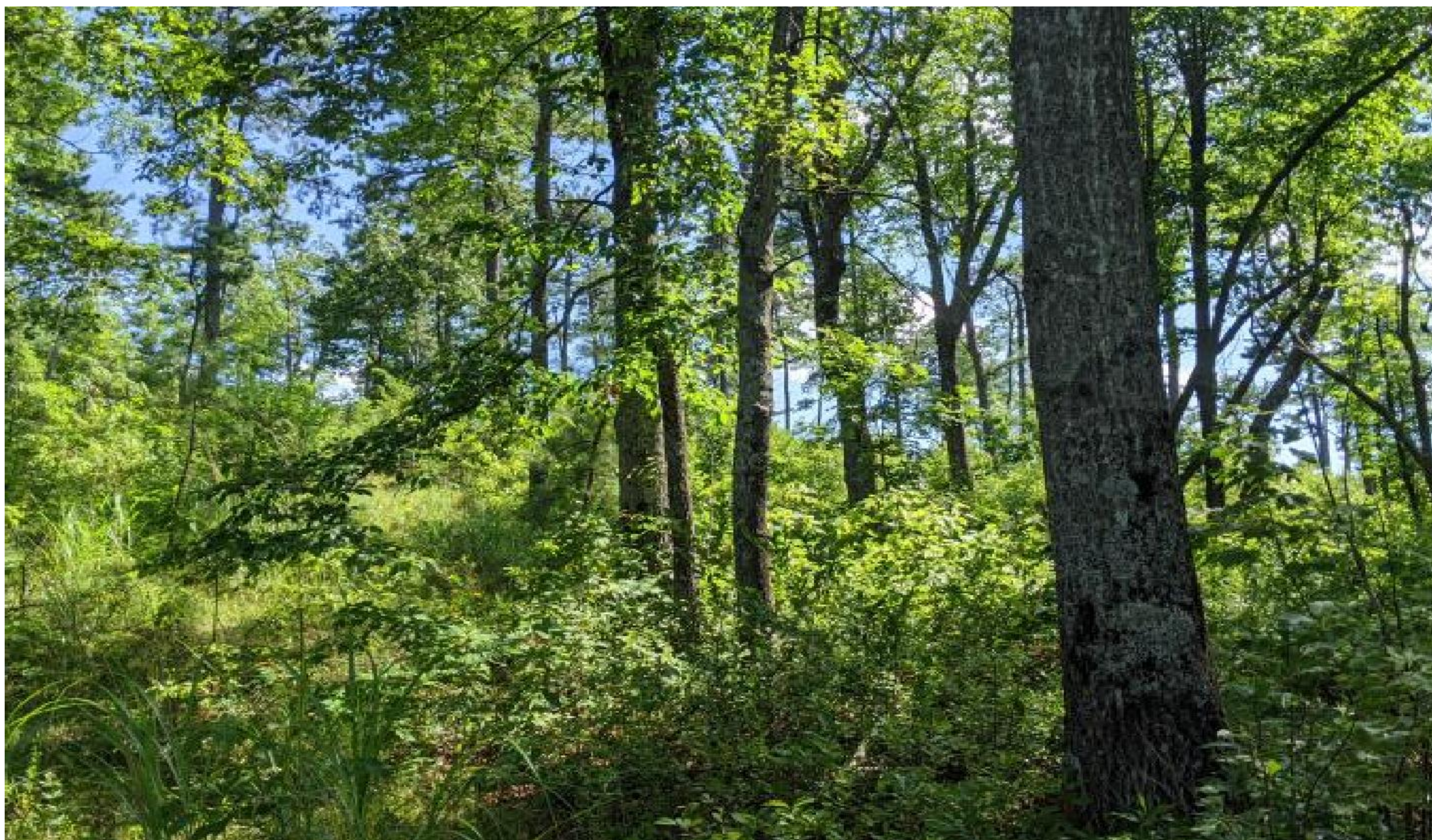




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36.00 x 48.00 in



In order to meet the goals of the GAP Project, PRI, and the Forest Plan, we've assessed the potential impacts of the following restoration activities, to be completed annually:

- 10,000-18,000 acres of controlled burns
- Completing stand improvement projects on an average of 1,800 acres (see The GAP Toolbox for examples of stand improvement techniques)
- Timber harvest for vegetation management on an average of 500 acres
- Creating woodland conditions on an average of 150 acres

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Tropical Storm Fred (2021) Impacts & Repair Update

Damage Sustained in Buncombe County on PNF:

- **Big Ivy Road (aka Coleman Boundary Road) – FSR 74**

Embankment Failure & Culvert Failure

***Estimated Cost to Repair \$1,277,840**



Tropical Storm Fred (2021) Impacts & Repairs Update

Damage Sustained in Buncombe County on PNF:

- **Stony Fork Road – FSR 63**

Very Severe Embankment Failure & Culvert Failure

***Estimated Cost to Repair
\$3,267,319**



Repairs to Date:

- Big Ivy Road (Coleman Boundary): Temporary repairs completed in 2023 to allow for the road to be re-opened.
 - \$260,000 – addressed erosion on culvert failures, roadway erosion & road reconditioning to return it back to standard.
- Stony Fork Road: Continues to be closed due to the severity of the damage.
- The USFS had a contractor complete a watershed projection plan to provide the USFS with additional information related to the Upper Ivy Creek & Dillingham Creek watersheds.





Next Steps:

- **Big Ivy Road (Coleman Boundary):** Long-term repairs projected to occur in 2025 that will include increased size of culverts to sustain future flooding and for aquatic organism passage. This will involve a temporary closure of the road towards the end of 2025 to complete that work.
- **Stony Fork Road:** To review the drafted watershed protection plan & hold a public meeting in Barnardsville to provide updates to community members (Fall 2024).

Questions ?

Thank You For Your Time

