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**February 27, 2023**

**USDA Forest Service**  
**ATTN: Ken Arney**  
1720 Peachtree Street, NW  
Atlanta, GA 30309

**Re: Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest, Forest Supervisor Hire**

We recently discovered the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest will be hiring a new Forest Supervisor. We know there will be many great candidates; what an opportunity for a new supervisor to make a lasting impression on the National Forest System.

At the Ruffed Grouse Society & American Woodcock Society (RGS & AWS), we envision landscapes of diverse, functioning ecosystems that provide homes for wildlife and opportunities for people to experience them. These same forests clean the air, filter water, and support local communities. Nowhere are these tenets truer, and the need greater, than the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest.

Our namesake, the ruffed grouse is a reliable indicator for healthy, diverse forests. A 2020 report from the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies highlighted that ruffed grouse declined 71% since 1989 in the Southern Appalachians. This is near disappearance of a bellwether species within our lifetimes.

The report, and many others, identify loss of forest diversity across large landscapes as the primary culprit. Dozens of other imperiled species that depend on forest diversity are rapidly declining on the Chattahoochee National Forest (Georgia's State Wildlife Action Plan). Urgent action is necessary at the landscape scale, the Forest Plan scale, to halt decline of ruffed grouse and associated wildlife before it is too late. Simply put, the lack of sustainable forest management is perpetuating a homogeneous landscape, one that falls short in diversity, forest health, and climate resilience (see Exhibit 1).

We do not want this to come across as a finger wag, "you should" letter. To the contrary! We want to be part of pragmatic solutions with you. There is much conservation work to do, and we want to build capacity and face challenges *with* you. We hope for a Forest Supervisor who is committed to promoting healthy forests and abundant wildlife in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. We look forward to working with the new supervisor to facilitate sustainable forest management and want to be part of pragmatic solutions with her or him for healthier, more resilient forests.

All the best in your search.

Sincerely,

Nick Biemiller, Forest Conservation Director, Southern Appalachian Region, RGS & AWS

*For more information visit the RGS & AWS website at [RuffedGrouseSociety.org](https://RuffedGrouseSociety.org). Follow us on Facebook and Instagram @RuffedGrouseSociety.*

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**Additional Signatories in Support:**

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## **Exhibit 1: Current Conditions on the Chattahoochee National Forest**

The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Chattahoochee National Forest's Land and Resource Management Plan (the Forest Plan) identified that in 2004 only 2% of the Forest was in early successional conditions. In fact, the quantity of early successional habitat (ESH) declined over 60% between 1985 and 2004. Also, the FEIS identified that ESH that did exist were not distributed regularly across the landscape. The FEIS projected that over 10-50 years the selected Alternative I would maintain 1.5% to 5.4% early successional forest across the Chattahoochee National Forest.

The Forest Plan established bold objectives, including Forestwide Objective 3.8 which states that the Forest Service will, "Create and maintain an annual average of 300 acres above 3,000 feet elevation in ESHs, achieving 3,000 acres within the first 10 years of Plan implementation". Achieving biologically significant levels of ESH is vitally important for at-risk wildlife species that are more restricted to mid- to high-elevation sites. For example, ruffed grouse and golden-winged warbler. Also, the Forest Plan created Forestwide Objective 4.1 to maintain 1 to 2% per decade of the riparian corridor within each 6th level hydrologic unit in early successional forest conditions, which is important for many wildlife species including American woodcock.

However, the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest's Fiscal Year 2013-2016 Monitoring and Evaluation Report revealed a forest diversity crisis. Unnaturally single-aged forests are persisting as the Chattahoochee National Forest meets objectives for mid to late successional conditions but fails to meet early successional forest objectives. The report identified that since the Forest Plan was signed in 2004 **the Chattahoochee National Forest has only created 384 acres of high elevation ESH out of the 3,000-acre 10-year Objective (13% of Forest Plan Objective)**. The Forest Service concluded that, "The Forest is not currently meeting this annual quantitative objective for creating 300 acres per year in high elevation early successional habitats". Also, the Monitoring and Evaluation Report identified that **only 23 acres of ESH could be reported across the Forest within riparian corridors, which does not come close to the 1 to 2% target for Objective 4.1** from the Forest Plan.