Dear Interested Citizen:

On May 18, 2012, the National Forests in North Carolina mailed a scoping letter for the proposed Linville Gorge Wilderness Prescribed Fire Project on the Grandfather Ranger District, Pisgah National Forest. In an attempt to reach more local residents adjacent to the Linville Gorge Wilderness, the Forest is now sending out additional letters to inform the public of the proposal.

Enclosed you will find the May 18 letter with information about the proposal and the opportunity to comment. Comments are continuing to be accepted and incorporated into the development of the environmental assessment (EA). For comments to be most useful, please submit them by January 15, 2013.

The Forest Service anticipates completion of the EA in the first half of 2013 at which point the document will be available on our website for further review and comment. Those individuals that provide comments on the attached scoping letter will receive notification of the completion of the EA. For further questions about the process, contact Heather Luczak at 828-257-4817 or email at hluczak@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
KRISTIN M. BAIL
Forest Supervisor

Enclosure
Dear Interested Citizen,

The National Forests in NC are beginning the environmental analysis process for the Linville Gorge Wilderness (LGW) Prescribed Fire project on the Grandfather Ranger District. The proposed action is to use prescribed fire, along with lightning ignited fire, in the 11,786 acre LGW, and on 4,800 acres of National Forest System (NFS) land adjacent to the wilderness.

Purpose and Need for the Proposal

Prior to the 20th century, many parts of the Linville Gorge likely burned every five to ten years from lightning-caused fires. Decades of fire suppression have altered the historic fire regime and resulted in a decline in native fire-adapted and fire-dependent communities, including pine-oak woodlands, oak forest communities, and two federally listed plant species. Fire suppression has also resulted in dangerously high fuel loads that can increase wildfire intensity, threatening firefighter safety, public safety, adjacent private property, and other resources both within and adjacent to the LGW.

Two of the major qualities of wilderness character in LGW that have been degraded by fire suppression are the untrammeled and naturalness qualities. Active suppression of lightning fires in wilderness, while sometimes necessary for safety and property protection, represents trammeling, where human influences impede natural forces or processes. The decline of fire-dependent ecosystems represents degradation of the naturalness quality of wilderness.

The purposes of the current proposal are to:

- Restore the historic fire regime and the plant communities and woodlands that benefit from frequent burning such as Table Mountain, pitch, and shortleaf pines and oak woodlands;
- Aid in the recovery of two plants listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act: mountain golden heather (Hudsonia montana) and Heller’s blazing star (Liatis helleri);
- Reduce buildups of unnaturally dense live and dead vegetation that can increase wildfire intensity.

Proposed Action

The following activities are being proposed as part of the Linville Gorge Wilderness Prescribed Fire Project:

- Conduct landscape-scale restoration burns in four burn units in and adjacent to the LGW (see attached map). The total potential area burned in the four units is approximately 11,000 acres within wilderness and 4,800 acres outside of wilderness.
- On lands outside of the LGW, utilize 23 miles of existing firebreaks, most of which represent Forest Service (FS) and county roads, requiring little or no maintenance. The
remaining firebreaks represent trails, old roads and other existing firelines that will require occasional maintenance, most of which occur on NFS land.

- On lands within the LGW, utilize natural firebreaks (river/streams) and other existing potential firebreaks (trails, old roadbeds). Appropriate hand tools and chainsaws would be used to maintain these firebreaks, as determined by the Minimum Requirements Decision Guide for activities in the wilderness.
  - In the northeast section of LGW, near the Gingercake community, when firebreaks outside of wilderness are not possible, new firebreaks within the wilderness will be created using manual hand tools and chainsaws, as needed (if determined to be the minimum tool).
- Maintain a 5-10 year fire recurrence interval for the fire dependent and fire adapted communities in LGW.
- Use manual (drip torch/fusee), flare gun, and aerial ignition for prescribed fires within LGW. Flare gun and aerial ignition would only be used when necessary for firefighter and other safety considerations and if determined to be the minimum tool through the MRDG.
- On lands within the LGW, permit lightning ignited fire to play as nearly as possible its natural ecological role.

Associated Forest Plan Amendment

This proposal includes an amendment to the Nantahala/Pisgah National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan to allow prescribed fire and lightning ignited fire to be used in the LGW for the purposes described above.

Concurrent Proposal

In December of 2011 the Forest Service initiated scoping on a proposal to control non-native invasive plant species (NNIS) in LGW. Prescribed fire or wildfire can result in conditions that support the establishment of NNIS in LGW: the higher the severity of the fires, the greater probability of NNIS infestations. Reducing fuel loads with prescribed fire and allowing more wildland fires to burn under prescribed conditions would reduce the risk of the more extreme high severity fires. The Pisgah National Forest is currently implementing a 2009 decision to treat NNIS outside wilderness areas. Effective NNIS control outside the wilderness as well as inside the wilderness would reduce the risk of additional establishment and spread of NNIS after fire. Monitoring NNIS conditions following fire is integral to the success of both projects and is vital for reducing NNIS infestations in the LGW. The proposal to control NNIS in LGW and the proposal for using prescribed fire in LGW will be analyzed together in and Environmental Assessment that will be available for public comment later this year.

Commenting on the Proposal

We are seeking your input on this proposal and encourage you to participate by providing your comments and suggestions. Your comments will be used to identify relevant issues and help guide the environmental analysis. Additional maps of the project area are available on the Forest website at: http://www.fs.fed.us/nepa/fs-usda-pop.php?project=37966.
Comments on the project are requested by June 23, 2012. Comments received after that date will be considered until the time a final decision is made. Comments can be mailed electronically, in a common digital format, to comments-southern-north-carolina@fs.fed.us and should include “LGW Prescribed Fire Project” in the subject line. Comments may also be mailed to USDA Forest Service, National Forests in North Carolina, ATTN: Heather Luczak, 160A Zillicoah St, Asheville, NC, 28801. All submitted comments will become part of the project record and available for public review. For further information on this project, please contact Gary Kauffman at the above address or telephone 828-257-4861. I appreciate your continued interest and support in the management and protection of the Linville Gorge Wilderness on the Pisgah National Forest.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

KEITH LAWRENCE
Acting Forest Supervisor

Map Enclosed