

To: Mr. James Melonas
Forest Supervisor
National Forests in North Carolina
160 Zillicoa Street, Suite A
Asheville, NC 28801

Subject: Forest Restoration Post Helene: A Call to Support the U.S. Forest Service

Dear Mr. Melonas:

Several months after Tropical Storm Helene ravaged Western North Carolina, restoration efforts continue across the region. The work is far from over.

We write today on behalf of the thousands of members and constituents represented by our organizations, including hunters, anglers, conservationists and other public land enthusiasts, to express our gratitude to the Forest Service. At the same time, we are concerned about efforts by some groups to modify the recently finalized Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests Land Management Plan, which would divert critical resources away from much-needed forest restoration and recovery work.

Western North Carolina is known for its beauty and natural spaces, including the Pisgah National Forest. The Pisgah is a multiple-use landscape utilized for hiking, biking, hunting, fishing, timber production and other recreational pursuits. The Forest Service handled an extremely difficult situation by deploying staff and resources to assist and save those in need through the thick of the storm. We acknowledge the work the Forest Service has put in for our communities and understand that it has likely been a difficult and busy few months.

The Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests experienced significant blowdown and infrastructure damage totaling nearly 200,000 acres as a result of Tropical Storm Helene. The work ahead to restore these areas of the national forest is monumental. Executing this work will require ongoing, collaborative efforts from the Forest Service and other partners for years to come. As proud partners of the Forest Service, we write to affirm our long-term commitment to standing shoulder to shoulder with federal workers to ensure meaningful progress on Helene recovery efforts.

We recognize as well that, in addition to recovery efforts, significant and ongoing work must be done on the Pisgah National Forest. Forest restoration work will be increasingly important in the near term to address the challenges of non-native invasive species, increased wildfire risk, and maintaining tree species and overall forest diversity. Considerable resources and collaborative efforts will be necessary to create optimal outcomes. Our groups are ready and willing to support and assist the Forest Service.

We are concerned that some groups have called for an amendment to the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests Land Management Plan. We believe that such an amendment is inappropriate and would be detrimental to the critical restoration work that needs to occur. The Forest Service should focus its efforts on the urgent and necessary task of restoring the forest

rather than becoming bogged down in a lengthy amendment process. The disaster funding available should be utilized effectively, and Forest Service resources should not be diverted from on-the-ground restoration work. The priority must be active stewardship to ensure these forests recover and remain resilient for future generations.

We are encouraged to see federal disaster funding arriving in North Carolina thanks to passage of a bipartisan spending bill in December 2024. Notably, several million dollars from the U.S. Department of Transportation will enable repairs to roads and bridges on the Pisgah National Forest. This is a critical step toward restoring public access to these areas and advancing stewardship work.

Actively managing and stewarding these areas will be essential in the years ahead. Passivity or a hands-off approach would only increase the risk and degradation of our forests. We support the Forest Service in a holistic approach that rebuilds essential infrastructure while implementing forest restoration and salvage projects that mitigate wildfire risk and promote forest diversity and resilience.

There is no shortage of work to be done, the stakes are high, and the clock is ticking. Forest Service resources were stretched thin before Helene made landfall, and we were committed then to assist with capacity. We are prepared to double down on that commitment now. We offer full support as you seek to gain answers and make informed management decisions based on science and data. We commend the Forest Service for rising to the challenge and are ready and willing to support in impactful ways.

Our groups remain committed as partners and users of our national forests to contribute to healthy forests for generations to come. Thank you again.

Sincerely,

American Woodcock Society

Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation

Fish and Wildlife Conservation Council

Haywood County Soil and Water Conservation District

National Deer Association

National Wild Turkey Federation, North Carolina State Chapter

Pheasants Forever

Quail Forever

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

Ruffed Grouse Society