Wilderness Society Assails Proposal For More Logging in Federal Forests

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Special to The New York Times

ATLANTA, Feb. 15 — Plans by the National Forest Service that would double allowable timber sales and nearly double the mileage of roads in six southern Appalachian national forests over the next 10 years would damage the recreational and scenic value of the rugged mountainous areas and harm their fragile ecosystems, a Wilderness Society study says.

The Federal proposal is the latest of a series of plans for the entire National Forest Service that have been evolving for 13 years. Most of the plans have come under attack from conservationists because of their emphasis on development, particularly road construction.

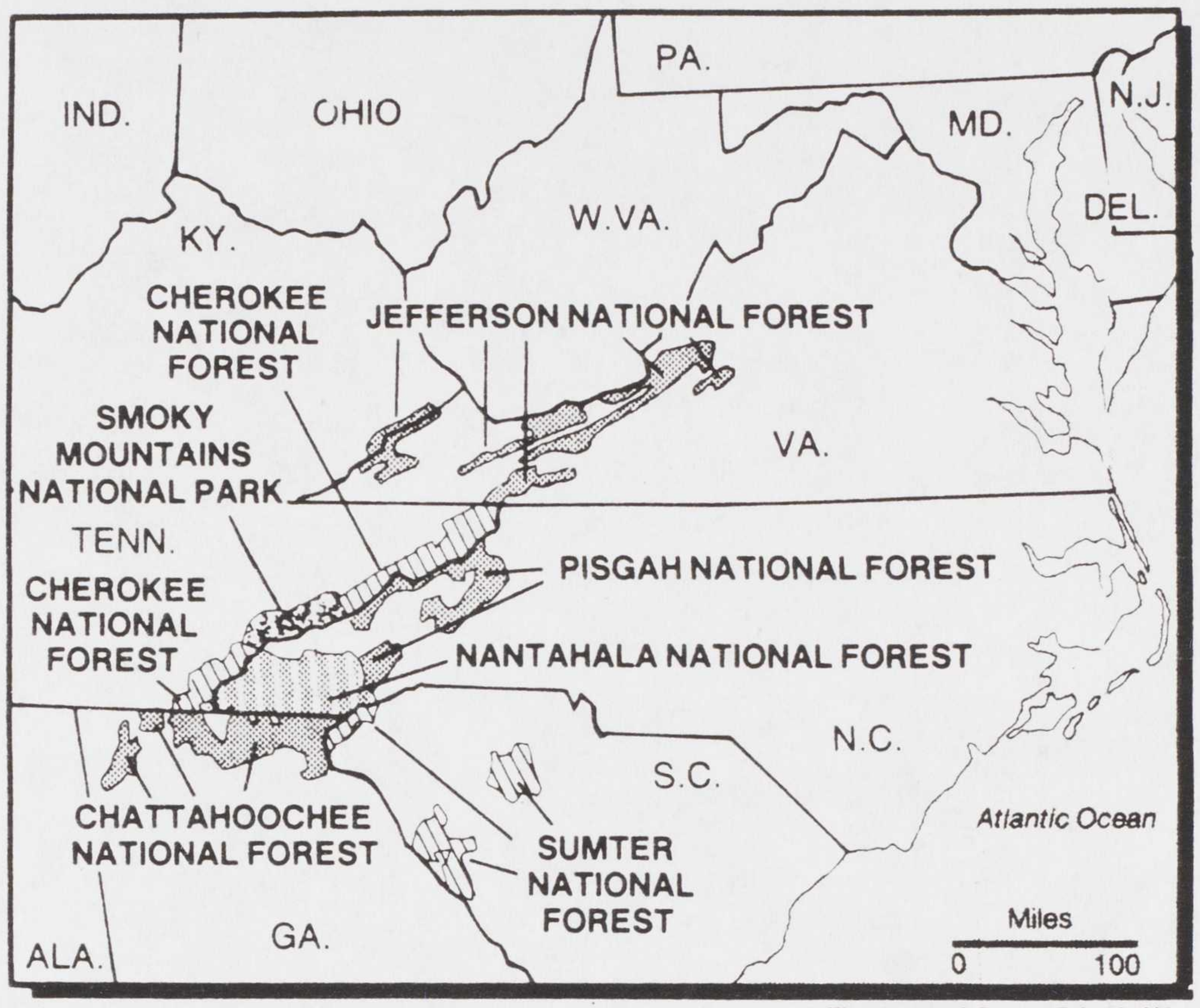
Once roads are built, the forestland cannot be used as a wilderness area, which is protected by law from many kinds of development.

According to the Wilderness Society study, the plans for the Southern forests, which are nearing completion, mirror a major weakness of the Federal stewardship of the forests. Although each forest area is a link in a wilderness chain running through five states, the Forest Service plans treat each separately and ignore their common features, the study said.

"The national forests should be viewed as an integrated entity rather than as isolated planning units," said Peter Kirby, director of the southern region of the Wilderness Society. "Yet the Forest Service is currently implementing its individual forest plans with little regard for regionwide concerns and no analysis of cumulative effects."

'Mandate Under the Law'

Officials of the service's regional office here criticized the Wilderness Society report as misleading. They said the figures cited on timber sales and road construction reflected what was possible and were not meant to be actual targets for development. The officials conceded that planning had not been regional in scope in most cases, but they insisted that this was necessary because of differing state laws, like those on water quality, that indirectly affect the forests.



The New York Times/Feb. 16 1989

Timber sales would be doubled in these national forests.

"Our mandate under the law is utilization of the forests and not preservation," said William Ryburn, a forester in the regional office. "We have to balance utilization with recreation, protecting wildlife habitats and with maintaining the ecosystem."

The national forests in the study are the Jefferson, the Pisgah, the Nantahala, the Sumter, the Chattahoochee, and the Cherokee. They are in Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

Mr. Kirby said the Wilderness Society was not recommending a halt to all logging in the six forests. Instead, he said, the study called for a reduction in the amount of logging allowed by the method in which swatches of up to 40 acres are leveled of trees and, in turn, an increase in selective cutting. The study also called for an end to logging on steep slopes and elimination of the sale of timber below the Government's cost of managing the forests.

Roads on Steep Slopes

The Forest Service has classified more than 2 million of the 3.5 million acres of forest in the six areas as suitable for logging over the next decade. As a result, harvested timber from the region could go from an annual average of just under 100 million board feet from 1977 through 1986 to over 200 million board feet annually by 1996.

The logging would be accompanied by the construction of roads, the report said, and Forest Service plans project an increase in road mileage from 4,951 miles to 8,214 miles by 2030.

Much of the logging and road construction would be on steep slopes, according to the Wilderness Society, damaging fragile and shallow soil and triggering erosion. Such erosion could raise the temperature of streams, thereby harming wildlife, in addition to hampering any replacement growth of the region's characteristic hardwoods.

Financial and environmental assumptions are questioned.

The increase in logging is both economically and environmentally unsound, said Laura Jackson, author of the report entitled "Mountain Treasures At Risk."

Timber harvested from public lands in the southern Appalachians by commercial logging outfits who bid for them amounted to only 10 percent of the harvest from 1980 through 1986. Logging on private land, farms and tree plantations in the region accounted for 88 percent. Ms. Jackson said timber from public lands was therefore not needed to meet market demand for hardwood, a demand that Forest Service officials agree has been either flat or declining in the region.

Furthermore, Ms. Jackson said, the service allows much of the timber to be harvested below the cost to the agency of managing the forests. By the Wilderness Society's calculations, the Government sold its timber at a $5.5 million loss in 1987 because of the below-cost bids they allowed.

Mr. Ryburn, of the forest service, disputed that, noting that the study counted as a loss the 25 percent of the timber revenues that the forest service turns over to local governments and that it failed to take into consideration accounting measures that quantify how the harvests will enhance the forests' future value for recreation and other uses.

By the agency's accounting methods, which include timber revenues from low-lying areas in each of the five states, the Forest Service actually made $6.5 million in 1987, he said.

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