

Paint Rock River Refuge Proposal

Summary of public comments

January 17 – February 28, 2013

The following comments were received via public meetings, emails, and letters. In some cases, a comment was summarized to get the general idea, in other cases the comment was copied verbatim. The comments have been organized under a variety of categories, such as, “Habitat and Wildlife”, “Public Use”, etc.

Habitat and Wildlife

- Large tracts of land like this need to be preserved.
- There are already enough parks and wildlife refuges in the area and people don't want any more on the mountain.
- I own land in that region and would like to see as much of that beautiful country preserved as possible.
- By default, the South Cumberland is a natural gem. The addition of these lands would enhance terrific connectivity between protected tracts, and provide all the benefits associated therein.
- Free-flowing rivers used to be taken for granted. Now they are rare ecosystems. They are necessary and essential for preservation of ecosystem services we all depend on. Further, maintaining and improving the integrity of a high quality, functioning ecosystem is far more efficient and inexpensive than trying to repair one that has been degraded and damaged by development or agriculture.
- There are many endemic species in the Cumberland Plateau which is somewhat similar to parts of the Ozarks.
- The proposed Paint Rock River NWR should serve many of the same purposes as our state park, but with primary emphasis on wildlife and its habitat, with special attention to species listed under the Endangered Species Act, including several species of mussels and fish plus the Indiana bat and gray bat. The refuge will be valuable for these purposes.
- Habitat suitability models indicate that the large, forested tracts of land in the area may provide habitat for future populations of mountain lions.
- The proposed refuge contains some of highest levels of aquatic and terrestrial biodiversity known in this region. The large areas of relatively unfragmented forest, combined with high water quality, provide high quality habitat for both aquatic and terrestrial species. This level of habitat quality is not found in surrounding lands.

Biodiversity

- The refuge would protect a very biodiverse region of our state.
- We encourage efforts to preserve our remaining natural environments, which give inspiration to humans and sustain life for a multitude of other species.

- Biodiversity is extremely important. Creating refuges will help prevent the vanishing of diversity in our surroundings and the wildlife that inhabit it.
- We need more efforts such as this to protect our increasingly imperiled and rare, high quality, free-flowing waters which host “rain-forest-like” aquatic diversity (fish, mussels, snails, crayfish, amphibians, etc.).
- Maintaining habitat sufficient to support "umbrella" species would go a long way in preserving a significant number of species that constitute this renowned biodiverse landscape.

Public Use

- Keep the trails and road open for ATV, 4X4s, jeeps, motorcycles, etc.
- Keep the trails and road open to horseback riding.
- Part of this land should be turned into an off-road park. A lot of this land is already used to enjoy off-roading and would be easy to convert to a pay-to-ride for off-road use.
- Alabama manages to keep trails open for off-road use, so surely Tennessee can manage to do that.
- The younger generation enjoys activities such as riding ATV, 4X4s, jeeps, motorcycles, etc. keeps them out of trouble and this should continue to be allowed on a refuge.
- People have been using hunting leases in the area for decades and do not want to see those closed down.
- Besides off-road riding, there are very few other activities in the area.
- What are the goals of the refuge and how can those goals be accomplished while keeping a refuge open to ATV (and other off-road) use?
- People have enjoyed the area’s wildlife for years without a refuge and don’t need one now.
- Allow camping.
- FWS should be careful to keep damaging activities out of the refuge, especially offroad vehicles. The damage done by ORVs to wildlife habitat has become a severe problem on Maryland state lands, including our wildlife management areas.
- The only downside may be the loss of ATV opportunities to locals. Perhaps some accommodation might be figured out in this regard. However, it also is possible that limiting ATV access will improve fishing and hunting in the area, thereby offsetting at least somewhat the loss of ATV access.
- Currently, motorcycles are responsible users of the Carter Mountain area through the CMRA lease. Should the Paint Rock proposal become a reality, this user group should not be denied access and the precedent of off-road motorcycle use in the area should not end.
- I think setting land aside is a great idea but it has to be made available for all user groups in a managed fashion. OHV touring has grown dramatically and the forest service has recognized that in Tennessee alone there are 909,000 OHV users in the state.
- It is extremely important for families to be able to recreate together in the outdoors. With growing violence, obesity and the breakdown of the family unit, OHV recreation is one

definite way for people to get exercise, share time together, learn life lessons about machine maintenance and just enjoy all of this public land we own. We don't want to destroy it, but take care of it and maintain any areas that may be prone to erosion. There are so many ways to take care of any situation due to vehicle traffic these days that there is no reason to not make these outdoor OHV areas a destination for all. Also, it brings people to these areas and helps support the economy of these areas, rather than families just sitting on a couch or the kids playing violent video games all day and little by little, the family nucleus deteriorate even more. I encourage you to work with all of us to make our public lands, just that, public.

- I own land in the proposed refuge and me and other landowners have worked hard to manage wildlife on our properties and tried to control the 4X4 rider who have done hundreds of thousands of dollars of damage on our properties over the years. We have heard that there is a push to allow 4X4s riding on the refuge. Is that true? That would be one of the biggest mistakes that could be made for us landowners because of the cost to our county law enforcement as there will be no way to control 4X4s on such a large area. As you move forward with this proposal, contact the local law enforcement and TWRA and ask them about problems 4X4 riders have caused our county.
- A refuge will make possible public access to wildlife-oriented activities such as hiking, nature study and hunting. This public access is becoming scarcer in our region as private lands get developed or closed to the public.
- The idea of a National Wildlife Refuge offers the opportunity to set aside land not only as a refuge for wildlife, but also a refuge for people from the stresses of life, and in the case of my father and other veterans, a refuge from the horrors of war and a place of remembrance of fallen comrades.

Access

- The road is taken care of by locals and the help of the federal government is not needed.
- The Walls of Jericho State Natural area is nearby. I have been told it takes 4 to 5 hours to walk down and back. Seniors and those with a disability cannot get access to it. It would be nice if they could just get to an overlook where they could see it.

Litter/Damage

- Off-road users are leaving trash and damaging property on my land costing hundreds of dollars.
- I am for this proposal because it would stop the four-wheelers from riding on my land.

Economics and Taxes

- Please take a look at what our surrounding states like Kentucky are doing with off-road uses and how much money they generate in the communities where off-road parks exist.
- People that come to ride horses in the area spend money in the county.
- This project would provide economic benefits to Tennessee and Jackson County (AL).
- A refuge would cause neighboring property taxes to double.

- The refuge has the potential for bringing tourist/recreational dollars to the county, which would benefit the retail sector, providing some employment, income, and tax revenues.
- It would increase the property values of homeowners adjoining the Refuge. Numerous studies, including some of my own, consistently have shown that proximity to protected areas raises the value of property near or adjoining those areas. This is good for landowners who choose to sell at some future date and good for the county government, which receives higher property tax revenues. Should landowners find the higher taxes burdensome, they can utilize the Greenbelt law to keep their taxes based upon use value rather than appraised value, thereby avoiding any negative impact to them of the higher appraisal.
- In a country and region where open space, and particularly biologically rich open space like the proposed Refuge site, is growing increasingly scarce while population is rising, the value of such protected land to society tends to grow relative to the value of using it in some alternative manner. It would be very interesting to estimate the value of the ecosystem services this area provides now and would likely provide into the future, given the growth of our region.
- This is a cash strapped region to say the least. Any opportunity which would enhance the tourist economy would be a boon.
- I totally disagree that the taxes will be made up by Congress. I live in east Tennessee where the majority of the land is held by the National Forest Service and we get little in the line of replaced tax revenue.
- The conservation of natural landscapes in close proximity to the cities and towns surrounding the Cumberland Plateau is a critical asset to enhancing quality of life for local residents and for attracting new business to the region (e.g. Volkswagen, Alstom, etc.).
- Increased public access and the increased visibility that comes about from official NWR status will also produce economic benefits as people come to the region to visit the refuge.

Partnerships

- A Paint Rock River Refuge could partner with Sewanee (University of the South).
- I have acreage on the proposed refuge and might be interested in selling or something of a partnership. I am tired of the clear cutting around me.

Environmental Education

- Instead of taking the land the Service needs to make young people understand that there are endangered animals in this area.

Water Quality

- A Paint Rock River Refuge would preserve the water quality.

- The thought of silt from ATV's riding in the area washing through the watershed into the Paint Rock River and threatening aquatic life, is irrelevant. The creeks at the headwaters of the river flood majorly during rain storms, resulting in washing silt from the mountains.

Project Boundary/Other Conservation Lands

- Keith Springs needs to be excluded from this proposal.
- The proposed refuge boundary should be extended into Alabama to include more of the Paint Rock River watershed.
- Please reconsider this proposal for a wildlife refuge, as 90% of the property is already protected and closed to the public. Carter Wildlife Area owns roughly 18000 acres of the proposed 25000. This property is completely closed to public access, has been for a great number of years, and will continue to be for a number of years to follow.
- Why are we included in the boundary of the watershed if you do not want our land? Why not move the boundary?

History and Traditions

- Families have long histories in the area, starting in Estill Fork.
- There are numerous family cemeteries in the project area.
- I own land in that region and would like to see as much of that beautiful country preserved as possible.
- I own property in the area of Keith Springs, and myself like many others have lived there since birth, inheriting the land of our ancestors. Our land is not only an asset to us, but has deep sentimental value as well, we do not like outsiders coming into the area, for the reason that they do not appreciate our way of life, and attempt to change it in one way or another.

Eminent Domain (Condemnation)

- I know people I know that live in that area are saying or getting the impression that it means the government or the service to this refuge are going to take their home and land/property away from them! That is not the case with what I read and I wanted to verify that that was not the case and that if a person owns land in the Refuge proposed area that they wouldn't have to sell to the service nor would it be taken from them.
- Please don't take the land that my family and I grew up on. It's all most of us have.
- I think that trying to turn Keith Springs Mountain into a wildlife sanctuary would be a great idea, except attempting to move people who have lived there for generations, which would be completely and utterly wrong.