



*Protecting the heritage, resources and economy of the Allegheny-Blue Ridge region*

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July 31, 2020

Mr. Richard Raione, District Ranger  
Monongahela National Forest, Gauley Ranger District  
932 North Fork Cherry Road  
Richwood, WV 26261  
(sent via electronic mail to [richard.raione@usda.gov](mailto:richard.raione@usda.gov), cc to [karen.stevens@usda.gov](mailto:karen.stevens@usda.gov))

RE: Freedom of Information Act Request for the Gauley Healthy Forest Restoration Project

Dear Mr. Raione:

The Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance (ABRA) is a coalition of over 50 organizations whose mission is “Protecting the Heritage, Resources and Economy of the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Region”. ABRA’s members are active participants in issues including those that affect the natural environment of West Virginia. Members have participated in past project planning and implementation on the Monongahela National Forest, most recently including the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, Panther Ridge, Spruce Mountain Grouse Management, Big Rock, Beulah, Greenbrier Southeast, and Upper Elk projects.

ABRA has a strong interest in becoming involved in the proposed Gauley Healthy Forest Restoration Project. We are hopeful that the project will accomplish ecosystem restoration objectives that align with our interests, and we also want to know how the project might impact environmental resources, particularly the endangered candy darter and other threatened, endangered, and sensitive species. Unfortunately, despite a projected decision date of July 2020, the Forest Service has not made any information about this project available to the public, other than the brief listing in the Schedule of Proposed Actions.

We note that the project is being proposed for exemption from National Environmental Policy Act analysis under a categorical exclusion that was established by Section 603 of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act. This categorical exclusion requires that projects be developed and implemented using a collaborative process that includes multiple interested persons representing diverse interests. The categorical exclusion also requires scoping and public notice. The project’s listing on the Schedule of Proposed Actions says that scoping was conducted in November 2019. However, despite our longstanding interest in projects on the Forest, none of us were involved in this scoping effort.

Therefore, to learn more about this proposed project, we are exercising our right under the Freedom of Information Act to request the following information regarding the proposed Gauley Healthy Forest Restoration Project and the cancelled predecessor project titled Gauley Integrated Spruce Restoration EA. The time frame covered by our request runs from the beginning of planning efforts for these projects to the present.

- All information that was produced by the Forest Service for project scoping and other collaboration with interested parties.
- All information that was received by the Forest Service from interested parties during scoping and any other collaborative interactions.
- All correspondence (formal and informal) between the Forest Service and interested parties during scoping and other collaborative interactions, including e-mails and notes from meetings, telephone calls, video conferences, etc.
- All information that was presented at meetings (in-person and virtual) between the Forest Service and interested parties, regardless of whether the information was presented by the Forest Service or other parties.
- All existing descriptive and analytical information about the project, including:
  - Project area description and boundary (maps and/or GIS layers),
  - Purpose and Need,
  - Description and location of proposed activity areas (including maps and/or GIS layers),
  - Protective measures for environmental resources,
  - Expected impacts to environmental resources, and
  - Any formal or informal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (including formal and informal correspondence, e-mails, call notes, meeting notes, etc.).

We also request a waiver of any fees associated with responding to this request for information. Our information request meets the test established at 5 U.S.C. 552(a)(4)(A)(iii); i.e., it “is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations and activities of the Government and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester.” Our organizations represent a broad segment of the interested public in West Virginia. We will use the information to inform our participation in the design and implementation of the project on behalf of our members. All of our organizations are 501(c)(3) non-profit corporations, so we have no commercial interests to serve.

Please provide the requested information to Lewis Freeman, Executive Director of the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance, P.O. Box 96, Monterey, VA 24665. We very much appreciate your attention to this request, and we look forward to working with you on the further development of the Gauley Healthy Forest Restoration project.

Sincerely,



Lewis Freeman, Executive Director

cc: Karen Stevens, Monongahela National Forest FOIA Coordinator