



NEWS FROM THE FOREST

A FRIENDS OF THE CHEROKEE NATIONAL FOREST NEWSLETTER

JULY 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

▪ Message from the Executive Director	....	page 1
▪ Projects & Accomplishments	....	page 3-7
▪ News & Announcements	....	page 7-8
▪ Current & Upcoming Initiatives	....	Page 9
▪ Volunteering	....	Page 10
▪ Facebook	....	Page 10
▪ Fun Facts	....	Page 10
▪ Circle of Friends	....	Page 12

A Message from our Executive Director: Mark Healey



Impacts of Budget Cuts on the U.S. Forest Service – From My Perspective

This piece is not intended as a political critique. It is simply meant to explain what is currently happening with the U.S. Forest Service in the context of past and current budget reduction efforts, long-term budget trends, and what this means for the Friends of the Cherokee National Forest.

Let's begin with the Clinton administration's "Reinventing Government" initiative in the 1990s. At that time, the administration focused on balancing the federal budget through a mix of tax increases and spending caps. This fiscal discipline imposed tight limits on discretionary spending, forcing agencies like the U.S. Forest Service to operate with flat or declining budgets in real terms. The Forest Service was under pressure to cut costs and improve efficiency, leading to office consolidations and

staffing reductions as part of broader reforms. Many core programs experienced reduced budgets, which contributed to postponing necessary maintenance on facilities and long-term operational challenges.

In the years that followed, wildfire suppression appropriations grew dramatically—from about 15% of the agency’s budget in the 1990s to over 50%. While the overall Forest Service budget often rose significantly during years with large wildfire allocations, base funding for other programs such as facilities maintenance, recreation and habitat maintenance remained stagnant and therefore lost ground to inflation.

During my 18 years with the Forest Service, my own experience, and that of many colleagues, was one of “wearing multiple hats.” Much of the work that had once been the responsibility of three or four employees fell to a single employee. While I personally enjoyed the challenge, the quality of what I was able to deliver inevitably fell short of what had been produced by several employees in the past. I recall a leadership team meeting where we discussed motivation and morale. A key takeaway was that most Forest Service employees are passionate about their work, but their biggest frustration is not having enough resources to meet the demand, whether that means miles of trail maintained, acres of habitat restored, or facilities kept to standard. There was always more work to be done than resources allowed. Prioritization became essential, applying limited funding to the highest and greatest needs. Greater emphasis was also placed on shared stewardship, relying on partnerships with state agencies, nonprofit groups, and other stakeholders to help meet management goals.

That brings us to 2025 and the current administration’s efforts to address the federal budget deficit through the Department of Government Efficiency and other means. In February 2025, DOGE terminated thousands of federal employees, primarily probationary hires, representing roughly 10% of the total workforce. In addition, DOGE used deferred resignation offers and Voluntary Early Retirement Authority packages to encourage federal employees, especially those near retirement, to leave voluntarily. The combined result of these policies was that many thousands of Forest Service employees departed, leading to staffing reductions across a variety of roles and programs, including some that were already stretched thin.

Additionally, the administration’s FY 2026 budget proposal calls for a substantial 22–23% cut in non-defense discretionary spending. These reductions affect domestic agencies across the board, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service. However, this budget reduction mandate allows Forest Service leadership the opportunity to innovate and evaluate new ways to accomplish and deliver services to the American people in a more efficient and cost saving manner. From what I understand, there is a significant effort to achieve these savings

primarily at the highest levels, the Washington Office and Regional Offices, in order to minimize impacts on Forest-level staffing. Final details have not yet been released.

How has all this affected the Friends of the Cherokee National Forest (FOCNF)? Some of our planned projects are on hold indefinitely due to staffing changes. Much of our work has been delayed as we stepped back from planning efforts to give the Forest Service space to process and adapt to the staffing impacts of the DOGE reductions.

What does this mean for the future of FOCNF and our partnership with the Cherokee National Forest? Time will tell. But on the surface, the need for an effective partnership to help deliver meaningful, mission-related results is greater than ever. As a new organization, we are still developing our business model, and we remain adaptable and ready to respond to requests for assistance in whatever form they may take.

Feedback is welcome! Please feel free to share your ideas or thoughts with me at info@focnf.org.

PROJECTS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

HIWASSEE BLUEWAY SIGNAGE PROJECT

We are pleased to announce the completion of new signage at the Powerhouse boat launch on the Hiwassee River in Polk County, TN, replacing old dilapidated and out of date signage. This project was made possible through the generous support of Chattanooga's Lyndhurst Foundation. It marks the first of four river access sites slated for new signage along the upper Hiwassee Blueway.



New Site ID and Interpretive Kiosk

Launched in 2015, the Hiwassee Blueway initiative aims to enhance recreational access, tourism, and conservation along the river. Spanning from Blythe Ferry to the Powerhouse boat ramp, it connects several Tennessee counties and encourages activities such as kayaking, fishing, and hiking. This collaborative effort promotes sustainable tourism and economic growth while prioritizing environmental conservation.

Standardized signage is essential for creating a strong sense of place, improving visitor experiences, and providing clear navigation and safety information along the Blueway. It helps highlight the area's cultural and environmental identity, boosting brand recognition and tourism. By fostering community pride and engagement, the project also helps ensure the Blueway remains a valued destination for future generations.

Our next steps include seeking funding to complete signage installation at the remaining three sites along the upper Hiwassee Blueway.

JUST IN TIME FOR SPRING: KAYAK RAFFLE FUNDRAISER

Friends of the Cherokee National Forest were excited to hold our first-ever fundraiser raffle, reaching out to the boating and fishing community for support. Our raffle offered a fantastic grand prize: the winner could choose any boat from River Sports Outfitters' regular selection of manufacturers in Knoxville, TN, including whitewater kayaks, stand-up paddle boards, and recreational or fishing kayaks.



Grand Prize Winner, Mary Long

We're thrilled to announce our winners! Mary Long of Maryville, TN was our grand prize winner. Second prize went to Kim Siler of Marietta, GA, and third place was awarded to Eric Evans of Morgantown, WV.

Congratulations to our winners, and heartfelt thanks to everyone who supported us by purchasing raffle tickets! A genuine thank-you as well to River Sports Outfitters and Immersion Research for generously providing prizes for this event.

SPRING WILDFLOWER FEST – GUIDED WALK

On Saturday, April 19th, the Friends of the Cherokee National Forest held our first-ever guided wildflower walks. We offered two back-to-back sessions for groups of no more than 15 participants each, following an easy-access trail that runs alongside the Hiwassee River in Polk County. Our guide was Mark Pistrang, a former Cherokee National Forest botanist and ecologist. We had a full roster for both walks, and attendance was excellent. The weather was delightful, and everyone who joined us had a wonderful time.

BEAR WISE SIGNAGE

Additionally, thanks to the generous support of our Friends, we were able to support South Zone's wildlife management program by assisting with the purchase of Bear Wise signs. These signs will help promote safe, responsible food storage practices, reduce human-bear conflicts, and support the Forest Service's ongoing efforts to protect both visitors and wildlife.



2ND ANNUAL FIREFLY FESTIVAL AND ART AUCTION

I'm pleased to announce that the second annual Greene County Firefly Festival and Art Auction was a tremendous success. Nearly 500 people traveled from near and far to participate in this year's festival, which was held over two evenings in late April. It was a wonderful time, with families and friends picnicking and socializing while waiting for the sun to set and the fireflies to begin their show.



Firefly Festival participants listen to the interpretive presentation.

Unfortunately, the firefly show was a bit lackluster this year. Mother Nature can be unpredictable, and perhaps due to the cool, wet spring weather, there were fewer fireflies than last year. However, not all was lost as captured in this participant's glowing review:

"I just wanted to thank all of you who made it possible for us to have such a wonderful time Saturday night. I was hoping that it would at least be interesting but was trying not to get my hopes up or have expectations. What actually happened was above & beyond what I could have expected. ... The rangers gave entertaining & informative talks that we actually listened to. The telescopes were so cool. We really appreciated that. ... I could go on but let's just say that everyone was awesome, the site was beautiful, the food truck was really good, everyone was friendly & nice, it was well-organized & every single bit of it was appreciated & enjoyed. The fireflies were amazing. I honestly had no clue that there were so many varieties. I can honestly say that I now have a favorite type (Blue Ghost, incidentally).

I hope very much that we get to attend again someday. I'm incredibly glad that I stumbled onto this event & do not regret schlepping my kids 500 miles to "see some bright butt bugs"... Thank you again for such a great time. ..."

The follow-on Art Auction was also a tremendous success. Heartfelt thanks to the artists who contributed the 44 pieces offered in the auction. The collection included original paintings, stained glass art, ceramic pieces, a handcrafted lamp, a quilt, vintage books, a handwoven Cherokee basket, and more. We're also deeply grateful to everyone who supported the event by placing bids on these unique works.

Altogether, proceeds from the Firefly Festival registration and lottery, along with the art auction, raised nearly \$14,000 to support Greene County tourism and Friends of the Cherokee National Forest to help restore the Horse Creek Recreation Area on the Cherokee National Forest after damage from Hurricane Helene. Restoration work is already underway, and our contributions will begin immediately.

SWEETWATER ELEMENTARY – ECO DAYS

Friends of the Cherokee National Forest (FOCNF) was proud to once again sponsor Sweetwater Schools' 4th grade participation in the Cherokee National Forest's Eco Days event—marking our second year supporting this outstanding conservation education program.

Thanks to the generous support of individuals and organizations we proudly call 'Friends' of the Cherokee National Forest, we were able to provide bus transportation, making it possible for the students to attend this signature outdoor learning experience.

Erica Watson, Media Arts Instructor at Sweetwater Elementary, shared her appreciation:

“Our students had the best time! Thank you so much for helping sponsor this trip!”

NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

TELLICO RIVER ROAD AND THE NEW BALD RIVER FALLS BRIDGE

On May 30, 2025, the Cherokee National Forest officially reopened the Tellico River Road along with the completely rebuilt Bald River Falls Bridge, following nearly two years of construction. The nearly 90-year-old bridge was fully disassembled and

reconstructed and now features key upgrades including a safe pedestrian viewing platform, railing systems, and benches, offering both spectacular scenic views for drivers and hikers alike.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony on May 29 commemorated the occasion, with project leaders highlighting the bridge's enhanced capacity to serve recreation enthusiasts, connect local communities (like Green Cove and Tellico Plains), and support economic vitality through tourism. Transportation engineers emphasized that the bridge's design preserves its historic character while improving safety and accommodating both vehicular and foot traffic separately.



Tellico District Ranger, Andrew Carrier talks to the press.

The reopening restores full access to one of East Tennessee's most iconic waterfall destinations—a 90-foot cascade on Bald River—and marks a significant milestone for road and recreation access in the region.

History Buffs—Stay Tuned for a Special Offer! Plans are underway to preserve a piece of local history by repurposing portions of concrete from the old Bald River Falls bridge. These unique relics will be paired with a custom-designed challenge coin featuring an image of the original bridge on one side and the new bridge on the other.

Tastefully presented together, these exclusive sets will soon be offered for sale to the public by Friends of the Cherokee National Forest.

VISIT OUR WEBSTORE

Looking for a great way to show your support for Friends of the Cherokee National Forest? Explore our online store, where you'll find t-shirts, mugs, books, maps, stickers, and more—now featuring new custom graphics you won't want to miss!



👉 Browse the shop here: [Home - Friends of the Cherokee National Forest](#) or scan the QR code.



We're currently updating our store platform to improve the layout and user experience, so be sure to check back soon for an even better shopping experience!

CURRENT AND UPCOMING INITIATIVES

- **Guided Wildflower Walks:** Explore the wonders of nature by joining a guided Wildflower Walk! Building on the success of this past spring's walks, we're excited to announce plans to expand this popular offering. Watch our website and follow us on Facebook to stay up to date.
- **Recreational Site Improvements:** Proceeds from this year's Firefly Festival and Art Auction are being used to repair and restore the Horse Creek Recreation Area following damage from Hurricane Heleen. In addition, we're organizing volunteer crews to help the North Zone with both deferred and routine recreation site maintenance. If you're interested in joining these efforts, please reach out to mark@focnf.org.
- **Sign Maintenance:** There are many Forest Service signs across the forest that are missing or in need of some TLC. We intend to work closely with the Forest Service to identify the highest priority needs and secure funding to deliver results.
- **River Cane Restoration:** The Forest Service has plans to restore native river cane to nine acres site, adjacent to Childers Creek along the Hiwassee River in Polk County.

If all goes to plan, this Fall, we intend to contribute to this effort by participating in the planting of approximately one thousand River cane plugs. Volunteers will be needed!

- **Trail Cleanup Hikes:** Coming soon, join us for one of our Trail Cleanup Hikes. Meet fellow nature enthusiasts and give back to the trails we love. Let's leave it better than we found it!
- **Nonnative & Invasive Species Management:** We intend to make this an annual initiative at multiple locations across the forest.
- **Trail Maintenance:** Forest Service leadership and managers have asked us to please help them maintain their extensive network of trails. We plan to make this call to action a key focus of our work and have begun developing a signature trails maintenance initiative similar to the Friends of the Smokies, Trails Forever' initiative.

INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING?

Email Mark Healey at mark@focnf.org and let us know of your interests.

JOIN OUR COMMUNITY ON FACEBOOK

We're excited to announce that our new Facebook page is live! Connect with us to stay updated on the latest news, events, and exclusive content. Join our growing community today and never miss an update!

Friends of the Cherokee National Forest at: [\(20+\) Facebook](#)

DID YOU KNOW? (FUN FACTS)

The Cloudland Hotel was a famous resort located on Roan Mountain, straddling the border between Tennessee and North Carolina. It was built in the late 19th century and became a popular destination for tourists seeking the cool mountain air and stunning views. Here are some details about the Cloudland Hotel:

History:

- **Construction:** The Cloudland Hotel was constructed in 1885 by General John T. Wilder, a Union Army general and entrepreneur. Roan Mountain's cool climate and picturesque scenery were major attractions for visitors from hotter, lower-altitude areas.

- **Unique Location:** The hotel was built at an altitude of approximately 6,200 feet on Roan Mountain's summit, making it one of the highest altitude resorts east of the Rockies. Its location also meant it was situated directly on the state line between Tennessee and North Carolina.
- **State Line Quirks:** The dining room of the Cloudland Hotel was famously divided by the state line. A white line was painted on the floor to mark the boundary. According to local lore, guests who wanted to avoid North Carolina's alcohol tax could simply stay on the Tennessee side of the dining room.

Features and Attractions:

- **Architecture:** The hotel was a large wooden structure with verandas offering panoramic views of the mountain ranges. It had 166 rooms and was equipped with amenities that were considered luxurious at the time.
- **Natural Beauty:** Guests were attracted not only by the hotel itself but also by the natural beauty surrounding it. The Roan Mountain area is known for its expansive rhododendron gardens, particularly the Catawba rhododendrons which bloom spectacularly in June.
- **Recreation:** Activities for guests included hiking, horseback riding, and enjoying the cool mountain climate during the summer months.

Decline and Closure:

- **Operational Challenges:** Despite its popularity, the hotel faced significant operational challenges. The remote location made it difficult to maintain and supply the hotel, and the harsh winters sometimes isolated the hotel from the rest of the world.
- **Closure:** These challenges, combined with changing vacation trends and economic factors, eventually led to the decline of the Cloudland Hotel. It ceased operations around the late 1910s or early 1920s and the building eventually fell into disrepair.
- **Demolition:** The structure was ultimately dismantled or fell apart over the ensuing decades, and today, little remains of the original hotel building.

Legacy:

- **Rhododendron Gardens:** The legacy of the Cloudland Hotel and its founder, General Wilder, is still celebrated through the famous Roan Mountain Rhododendron Gardens. These gardens attract thousands of visitors during the blooming season.
- **Historical Significance:** Although the hotel no longer stands, its story remains a fascinating chapter in the history of the southern Appalachian region.

The Cloudland Hotel is remembered as a symbol of a bygone era, when travel to remote locations was a grand adventure and mountain resorts offered an escape from the summer heat for those who could afford the journey.

Thank you for reading and watch for our next News from the Forest newsletter, in January.

Friends and Partners

\$35 – Footpath

- ✓ Simone Canclini
- ✓ Sue Christensen
- ✓ Kristen & Rich Colwell
- ✓ Kimberly Corbit
- ✓ Donna White Dropkin
- ✓ Walt Evans
- ✓ Wallace Goodman
- ✓ Ann Higgins
- ✓ Larry Horn
- ✓ Sherry Johnson
- ✓ Leslie King
- ✓ Tony Knox
- ✓ Karen Lewis
- ✓ Jeannie Miller
- ✓ Jan Muir
- ✓ Joe Nowotarski
- ✓ Sam H. Oldham
- ✓ Mark Shipley
- ✓ Ed Sullivan
- ✓ Beth Taylor
- ✓ Diane Wasserman
- ✓ Linda Webb

\$50 – Acorn

- ✓ Susan Watson Arbital
- ✓ Randal Bryand
- ✓ Garret Durland
- ✓ Swarupa Ganesh
- ✓ Becca Goodwin
- ✓ Rouja Green
- ✓ Ken Hill
- ✓ Karen Lewis
- ✓ Ed McAlister
- ✓ Barbara Muhlbeier
- ✓ Tamara-Woods Poplin
- ✓ Malinda Russ
- ✓ Clare Sullivan
- ✓ Gerald Thornton
- ✓ Kimberley Tupps
- ✓ Linda Webb
- ✓ Fran Willis

\$100 – Wildlife

- ✓ Michael Callaway
- ✓ Kayla Carter
- ✓ Will Skelton
- ✓ Tom & Becky Jackson
- ✓ John & Emma Haile
- ✓ Marjorie Hertneck
- ✓ Joy Wilson-Holt
- ✓ Becca Irvin
- ✓ David Martin
- ✓ Nancy Watts

\$250 – River

- ✓ Ellis Bacon
- ✓ Lynne Degitz
- ✓ Ty Fulgham & Paul Hotsinpiller
- ✓ Buck Adams & Larry Vincint

\$500 – Woodland

- ✓ Everett Aldridge
- ✓ Tania Dirks
- ✓ Randal Graham
- ✓ Bruce Healey
- ✓ River Sports Outfitters
- ✓ Smoky Mountains Hiking Club
- ✓ Wildbirds Unlimited (Knoxville)

\$1,000 – Forest

- ✓ Ken Cagle & Ben Keyser
- ✓ Mark Healey
- ✓ Ruth Healey
- ✓ Daniel Hurst
- ✓ Jeff Richards
- ✓ Zack Ridder

\$2,500 – Vista

\$5,000 + – Landscape

- ✓ Cleveland/Bradley Chamber of Commerce
- ✓ The Lyndhurst Foundation