



The Wildlife Society

North Carolina Chapter

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March 30, 2006

USDA Forest Service
SRS Comments, Lands 4S
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Mailstop 1124
Washington, DC 20250-0003

To whom it may concern,

The North Carolina Chapter of The Wildlife Society (NCTWS) submits the following comments on the proposed sale of federal lands in North Carolina to provide funding to reauthorize the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000. NCTWS is an organization of over 200 wildlife professionals devoted to guiding and promoting the conservation and management of wildlife resources throughout North Carolina. We strongly oppose the sale of federal lands to fund rural education needs. The sale of federally protected lands would work against positive ongoing efforts in North Carolina to benefit wildlife resources.

- **The proposed land sales act to reverse conservation goals of adding to public-trust lands in North Carolina.** North Carolina is the 6th fastest growing state in the country. Over the last decade, more than one million acres of natural and rural areas have been developed. Over the next 25 years, the population of North Carolina is projected to increase by nearly 50 percent to more than 12 million people. Our state is forward looking in terms of growth and economy but the citizens of North Carolina also recognize the need to preserve their natural heritage and the areas that make this state special. Many conservation initiatives have come about in recent years in order to devise ways to plan for this growth while preserving rural landscapes and acquiring more public-trust land at every opportunity. The statewide *Land for Tomorrow* coalition hopes to substantially increase state funds for the acquisition and protection of streams, farms, forests, parks, game lands and historic places in North Carolina. *One NC Naturally* is another statewide initiative that promotes the long-term conservation of North Carolina's threatened land and water resources through the implementation of a comprehensive conservation plan involving government agencies, private organizations, landowners and the public. Regional partnerships such as the Onslow Bight Initiative at the

coast, the Greater Uwharries Conservation Partnership in the central part of the state, and the many land trust coalitions in the mountains aim to maintain habitat corridors and buffers in areas already affected by growth and development patterns. The sale of our federal forest lands is contrary to these goals.

- **The sale of some federal forest lands fall within critically important wildlife and habitat conservation areas.** Some of the tracts slated for sale in North Carolina fall within focus areas or habitats that have been prioritized for conservation to protect watershed health, fish and wildlife habitat, and the air and water supplies upon which North Carolinians depend. Two of these habitat types include mountain riparian zones (Pisgah National Forest) and coastal longleaf pine forest (Croatan National Forest). Both of these systems support highly diverse and highly threatened ecological communities that are prioritized for conservation in the NC Wildlife Action Plan, and through other regional conservation efforts (e.g., The Nature Conservancy's ecoregional plans, the Onslow Bight Initiative). These efforts advocate an overall reduction in habitat fragmentation and isolation, *especially* in our highest priority conservation areas, in order to maintain the ecological health of our state. The sale of small, disparate land parcels would further fragment and isolate these areas, especially if they were opened up to private interests that may be counter to our public trust land conservation goals.

In the event that a decision is made to sell the aforementioned properties in North Carolina, NCTWS requests that local and state agencies, non-government land trusts and conservation organizations be given the right of first refusal on the purchase of these lands so that they may be maintained and managed for habitat conservation purposes.

If I can be of further assistance regarding this issue please do not hesitate to contact me (919-856-4520 ext. 17). Our organization looks forward to a positive future regarding the existing federal lands and their management in North Carolina.

Sincerely,

JohnAnn Shearer
President, North Carolina Chapter of The Wildlife Society