

Michael F. Easley
Governor



State of North Carolina
Office of the Governor

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GOV. EASLEY SEEKS TO PROTECT 174,000 ACRES OF FEDERAL FOREST LAND
Files petition with U.S. Dept. of Agriculture to exempt areas from development

RALEIGH – Gov. Mike Easley moved today to protect nearly 174,000 acres of National Forest lands in North Carolina that a Bush Administration rules change would otherwise open to logging and road construction. The Governor filed a petition with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to exempt the North Carolina forest lands from development.

“These forest areas are vital not only for their natural beauty and the recreational opportunities they offer, but also for their environmental benefits, including providing clean water and wildlife habitat,” Easley said. “They are unique places of unspoiled wilderness and beauty and must be protected and preserved.”

Easley’s petition will preserve prime habitat for black bears and views of the Nantahala Gorge. It also protects areas near the Blue Ridge Parkway, an important economic resource in Western North Carolina that draws millions of visitors each year. The urgency to protect these natural areas has come into even sharper focus recently with the Bush Administration’s proposal to sell off about 10,000 acres of North Carolina federal forest land, a move opposed by Easley.

In 2001 the Clinton Administration adopted a rule that preserved all roadless areas and allowed for timber harvesting and road construction only in exceptional circumstances, such as reducing the risk of wildfires. In May of 2005 the Bush Administration replaced the rule with a petition process that requires governors to petition the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture for protection of these roadless areas.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will review Easley’s petition and must take action within 180 days. Once the Agriculture Secretary approves the petition, it triggers a rulemaking process which would include bringing together those with a direct interest in the lands, giving public notice of the proposed rules and accepting public comment.

Ultimately, the Secretary of Agriculture makes the final determination regarding protection of the land. In light of the bureaucratic and burdensome process, Easley is asking that the USDA expedite consideration of the petition and provide for temporary protection of the land while federal officials deliberate.

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“This new process places a burden on states to protect lands that are a federal responsibility and presents states with an onerous petition process that is, frankly, unclear,” Easley said. “But North Carolina will move ahead to protect these lands for the sake of the state’s environment and its people.”

The National Forest roadless areas proposed for protections by Easley’s petition are:

Croatan National Forest	20,780 acres
Nantahala National Forest	52,650 acres
Pisgah National Forest	100,480 acres
TOTAL:	173,910 acres

Since 1998, North Carolinians have submitted more than 50,000 public comments to the U.S. Forest Service in support of protecting these areas. Many of the roadless areas in the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests are within watersheds that the state Division of Water Quality has classified as High Quality Water or Outstanding Resource Water. North Carolina depends on these areas to provide a buffer to protect watersheds, particularly for the Asheville and Hendersonville areas.

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