

**Mount Rogers High Country
Limits of Acceptable Change Process Summary
6/23/04**

Introduction

The High Country LAC process had its impetus in the 1993 High Country Use Survey and the 1994 Wilderness Campsite Condition inventory. Those studies, while not identifying serious social or resource problems did show increasing resource impacts and conflicts. Use continued to climb during the late 1990's to an estimated 200,000 users per year by 1999.

This process was somewhat unique and considerably more complex than most because it included the whole 20,000-acre High Country which is about half wilderness (Lewis Fork and Little Wilson Creek) and half non-wilderness. It contains 95 miles of trail and is adjacent to Grayson Highlands State Park, a primary access point over which we have little to no control.

The process was limited primarily to recreation. It did not reopen decisions such as crest zone vegetation management, prescribed fire, road decisions, or soil and water projects.

Following Steps 1-8 of the process, involved 16 public meetings over 4 years between July, 1999 and June, 2003. Attendance ranged from 75 people in the first few meetings to an average of about 15 which comprised the core group by the end of the process.

Issues

- Minimize and manage physical impact from users on resources including unique ecological communities, wildlife and fish habitats and watersheds.
- Manage social impacts and conflicts among users.
- Identify appropriate levels, methods and types of restrictions, regulations, enforcement and education.
- Preserve unique High Country Character
- Maintain and enhance appropriate user access
- Minimize adverse affects of use and management on local communities and economies

Zones (Opportunity Classes)

- 1A-Primitive Wilderness-No Trails
- 1B Primitive Wilderness- Trailed
- 1C Primitive Wilderness- Trailed (Mod-High Use)
- 2A Primitive Non Wilderness-No Trails
- 2B Semi Primitive Non Wilderness-Low Use Trails
- 3 Semi Primitive Non Wilderness- Mod-High Use Trails
- 4 Concentrated Use (Trailheads/High Use Corridors)

Indicators/Standards

- Campsite Density-Range: 0 in 1A to <10/1000 ac in Zone 3
- Bare Ground in Campsites- Range: 0 in 1A to <75% of sites in Zone 4

- Condition Class-Range: 0 in 1A to no worse than “4” in Zone 4
- Fire Ring Density-Range: 0 in 1A to no more than 1/site in Zone 4
- Encounter Frequency (Groups/day)-Range: 1 in 1A to 25 in Zones 3 and 4

Alternatives

- Alt 1: Primitive-Narrow trail corridor zones, more untrailed area, reduce campsites, trail closures
- Alt 2: Expand Access-more trailheads/trails, wider trail corridors zones, reduce campsites
- Alt 3: Reduce Impacts-wider trail corridors, reduce campsites, trail closures
- Alt 4: No Change-maintain current conditions-no further degradation, includes 3C
- Alt 5: No Action (LAC not implemented)

Selected Alternative

- Hybrid closest to Alt 3-some additional access and trail closures

Current Status/Planned Actions within next 5 years:

- 10 Person Group size limit applied to entire High Country
- Horses and bicycles restricted to designated routes
- Increased education/user contacts with info boards and seasonal rangers explaining camping containment strategy
- Extensive campsite closures to meet standards-close/rehab approximately 45 campsites
- Designated sites in the Rhododendron Gap/ Thomas Knob corridor-Zone 3
- Established sites in 1B and 2B
- Close and rehabilitate Solomon Branch Trail
- Close or relocate Bearpen Trail
- Add two short tie trails (Low Gap Road and Hightree Rock Trail)
- Improve/expand Jackie Street Parking Lot on VA 739
- Improve/expand AT lot on VA 603

Lessons Learned/Critique

- “Cut your teeth” on non-complex unit or units
- Try to handle LAC with no more than 4 meetings (all day Saturday mtgs.)
- Space meetings as close together as possible
- Have very good inventory data available for use during the meetings.
- Consider handling the lion’s share of Steps 2-5 in house, ie: develop zones indicators and standards then explain and validate with public. This will reduce confusion and number of meetings significantly
- Need clearer direction on LAC tie to NEPA/NFMA- our idea was to tier implementation plan to the Forest Plan (similar to fire management plan); then take specific actions with NEPA decisions (like designated sites, trail closures). This is essentially what the Cohutta has attempted to do.
- LAC standards do not seem to correspond or equate to Forest Plan standards.

