



## To Burn or not to Burn: That is the question

By Jim Walker: Toccoa District Leader

I had expected all the fall color to be gone by the end of October. I was wrong. It was November 18, and I was amazed to see on the steep mountain slopes by far the most brilliant color I had seen all season. Not solid color; most of the trees were bare. But scattered everywhere were intense spots of incredibly bright orange maples and deep red oaks that had, for some reason, ignored the calendar. Executive Director Wayne Jenkins, ForestWatch member Liz Andrews and I were driving up towards the Cohutta Wilderness on our way to Jacks River Fields campground, where we were to meet Forest Service representatives at the site of the proposed Flat Top prescribed burn to hear them explain why they wanted to burn that particular area.

We arrived slightly late to find at least 10 concerned citizens, Cohutta District Ranger Debra Whitman, three other Forest Service employees and a representative of the Nature Conservancy waiting for us.

Everyone got back in their vehicles for a short ride to the other side of Jacks River, and then we headed off on foot into the proposed 1,000-acre Flat Top burn area. What I hoped to see and hear was an on-the-ground show-and-tell of why this particular site needed to be burned. I had even brought along a copy of the Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC) Field Method Guidebook (downloaded from [http://www.frcc.gov/docs/Complete\\_Guidebook.pdf](http://www.frcc.gov/docs/Complete_Guidebook.pdf)), in case someone was willing to show me how FRCC is determined in practice. No such luck. In spite of the emphasis placed on FRCC in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan, the concept does not seem to have much of a following among Forest Service employees.

The area we were hiking through did not look good from a pro-burning point of view. Not far from Jacks River, it was fairly wet, with lots of hemlock and laurel, no significant white pine encroachment and nothing that could be called fuel buildup. From conversation overheard along the trail, it seemed that almost everyone felt that fire would be totally inappropriate there.

Even the Forest Service agreed. Apparently, the 1,000-acre site had been drawn to take advantage of existing, easily defensible boundaries such as the Jacks River and roads. (Unfortunately, completing the enclosure

would require using a bulldozer to clear a fire line between two roads, which would open up a dandy loop for illegal use by off-road vehicles. The area we were actually seeing, while within the boundaries of this prescribed burn proposal, was not intended to be burned.

So instead of a look-at-this demonstration of the need for fire, the outing was reduced to a beautiful setting for a theoretical discussion of the issue.

When the group came to an open spot, we stopped to talk. The Forest Service gave a well-practiced presentation of the benefits of fire: fuel reduction, ecosystem restoration, wildlife habitat improvement and combating rampant white pine seedlings. With a range of several objectives, whenever any one of them was challenged, the fall-back position was “Well, that’s not the only reason.” When the floor was opened for questions, the concerned citizens, who were mostly local landowners and developers, were uniformly skeptical.

All of the Forest Service employees unfailingly responded very gracefully and patiently. I am always impressed by how willing they are to engage in public relations. I know that I would have very little tolerance for public input on my own work, no matter how well or poorly informed it might be.

As the discussion dragged on, with no one giving any ground, the concerned citizens melted away until only a few of us were left with the four Forest Service employees. We walked further up the creek, through some really nice, maturing second growth forest, to a small waterfall, and along the way we had an opportunity to talk one on one. It was especially inspiring to hear Mike Murphy, the district silviculturist, tell about the ten years he and his family spent as missionaries in Africa and Mexico, and from Ricky Hughes, the fire crew chief, I learned interesting details about the procedure for carrying out a prescribed burn. When we returned to our vehicles, everyone sincerely thanked each other for the time spent together in the forest on an exceptionally beautiful late-fall day.

Toward the end of January, I heard from Ricky that, due to lack of funds, the Cohutta District would probably not be doing any prescribed burning this year.