

National Parks Conservation Association
Sierra Club
Southern Environmental Law Center
Appalachian Trail Conservancy

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Great Smokies conservationists seek end to wasting money on proposed road

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In response to the National Park Service's release today of a draft environmental study of building a highway through a remote area of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, several conservation groups called on Congress to put an end to what they call a boondoggle for American taxpayers and an environmental disaster for America's favorite national park.

The 38-mile road is estimated to cost \$590 million, according to the agency – an increase of almost 40% over the estimate from just one year ago. The amount covers construction and does not take into account any environmental mitigation that is required by law.

The proposed road would breach the largest unbroken tract of mountain forest on federal land in the East, on the North Carolina side of the park, leaving a gash on the landscape that would be visible for miles. Cutting through the most rugged section of the park, the road could include three massive bridges, each one roughly the length of the Brooklyn Bridge. Among other impacts, the road would bisect the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and be visible for many miles along the AT, destroy 28 miles of the Benton MacKaye Trail, pose a serious threat to 140 pure mountain streams due to polluted runoff from exposure of the acidic rock in the area, and harm vital habitat for a multitude of forest species including black bear and migratory songbirds.

The highway is opposed by dozens of local, regional and national groups, as well as North Carolina Governor Mike Easley, the local Swain County Commissioners, the Bryson City Aldermen, and local civic leaders in this rural part of western North Carolina. Several conservationists are calling on Congress to end immediately any further funding for the study or construction of the proposed road through the Smokies.

“Blasting a road through the most rugged, remote part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park that will serve no transportation need is an economic and environmental debacle that will affect all Americans,” said DJ Gerken, Staff Attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center. “The project should stop, now.”

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See www.SouthernEnvironment.org for background on the North Shore Road

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The National Park Service has publicly acknowledged in the past that the highway would serve no transportation need, and would jeopardize the agency's mission to protect the rich biological and cultural resources of the park. The World Conservation Union, in reviewing the park for World Heritage designation, judged it: "The most important natural area in the eastern US ... of world importance as an example of temperate deciduous forest. [I]ts floristic diversity is unmatched in any other protected area of its size in the temperate world."

The impetus for the road is to compensate Swain County, NC, for the loss of a county road in 1943 when the federal government built a major dam that created Fontana Lake. The National Park Service began construction of a replacement road in the 70s, but quit after completing seven miles due to the extreme environmental damage and exorbitant costs. Since then, community leaders and conservationists have advocated for a monetary settlement paid by the federal government to Swain County. The county commissioners and Gov. Easley support a payment of \$52 million – a fraction of the current estimate of building the road.

"The monetary settlement for Swain County would protect the nation's most beloved national park, and satisfy the request of the Swain County commission," said Greg Kidd, associate southeast regional director with the National Parks Conservation Association. "The environmental cost for building a road through the park is simply not worth it."

"The park service has received thousands of public comments in support of the monetary settlement option in lieu of building the destructive road," said Natalie Foster with the Sierra Club. "Why isn't the agency willing to support the option that saves taxpayer dollars and protects America's most visited national park?" The DEIS identifies a monetary settlement as the "Environmentally Preferred Alternative."

"The Appalachian Trail Conservancy supports the Swain County Commission recommendation of a \$52 million settlement with the NPS," said Morgan Sommerville, with the ATC. "We believe this win/win choice is best for Swain County, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park."

The National Park Service has set March 20 as the end of the public comment period on the project. Below is a list of the public hearing schedule. All meetings will begin at 4:30:

- February 2 at Swain County High School in Bryson City, NC;
- February 6 at Robbinsville High School in Robbinsville, NC;
- February 7 at Asheville Renaissance Hotel in Asheville, NC;
- February 9 at Knoxville Marriott Hotel in Knoxville, TN;
- February 13 at Gatlinburg-Pittman High School in Gatlinburg, TN.

(A list of North Shore Road opponents is attached)

Road through the Smokies

The following organizations support a monetary settlement for the people of Swain County in lieu of the North Shore Road and oppose the construction of any additional roadway north of Fontana Lake.

Tim Wilhelm
North Carolina State Chairman
704-442-1253
North Carolina Trout Unlimited

Christopher E. North
Special Projects Director
704-332-5696
North Carolina Wildlife Federation

Jimmy Groton
President
Tennessee Citizens for Wilderness
Planning
865-481-8732

Mark Shipley
President
Smoky Mountains Hiking Club
865-693-9795

Ray Payne
Great Smoky Mountains Committee
Chairman
Tennessee Chapter – Sierra Club
865-693-6944

Rachel Doughty
Attorney
WildLaw
828-252-9223

Tracy Davids
Executive Director
Southern Appalachian Biodiversity
Project
828-258-2667

Nelson Ross
Executive Director
Tennessee Izaak Walton League
865-523-3838

Chris Canfield
Executive Director/Vice President
Audubon North Carolina
919-929-3899

Carrie Clark
Executive Director
Conservation Council of North Carolina
919-839-0006

Catherine Murray
Director
Cherokee Forest Voices
423-929-8163

Ellen Fisher
President
Foundation for Global Sustainability
865-974-5048

Mark Shelley
Director
Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition
828-252-9223

Jody Flemming
Executive Director
Western North Carolina Alliance
828-258-8737

Mary Anne Hitt
Executive Director
Appalachian Voices
828-262-1500