

A Case Opposing Controlled Burn Proposal for Panthertown Valley

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The USDA Forest Service is proposing a controlled burn for Little Green Mountain and Blackrock Mountain of Panthertown Valley, a significant State Natural Heritage Area in southern Jackson County, North Carolina. The basis for the controlled burn as stated in the USFS letter for response is “This burn would be designed to restore table mountain pine in the forest.”

I have significant questions of the value for this activity. There is little in the way of table mountain pine trees except for the shallow-soiled rock outcroppings of southwestern slope of Little Green Mountain and there may not be any on Blackrock Mountain. For this small population, a controlled burn may do more harm than good to help to propagate the pines. Most of the pines occur in shallow, organic rocky pockets of the outcrops. If fire did get into these organic soils and it was dry enough, burning the soil would reduce the available habitat for the pine seeds. I would imagine the value of carrying through with the controlled burn would be costly and likely not result in new trees in the process.

A second reason that burning here would have a negative impact would be to reduce the pinkshell azalea, maybe destroy the southeastern Appalachian endemic population of twisted-hair spikemoss, sandmyrtle, purple and Carolina rhododendron, and blueberries. This would be a negative impact on the existing botanical diversity as well as rare species such as the pinkshell azalea.

A third reason is that burning does not speed up organic debris decomposition for this humid region. Unlike the drier western ecosystems where woody fuel accumulates due to the lack of decomposers, our organic debris more quickly breaks down due to the abundance of fungi and bacteria in our moist ecosystems.

Perhaps the only positive value of such an experiment would be to set back the succession of vegetation, maybe increasing the forage for some early successional animals. While this might be argued from a wildlife point of view, it needs to be balanced with the value that would be lost if the soft mass, such as blueberries, were lost from the ecosystem.

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