



Friends of Panthertown, Inc.
PO Box 51 Cashiers, NC 28717
(828) 269-HIKE (4453)
www.panthertown.org

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Mike Wilkins, District Ranger, Nantahala Ranger Districts
Mr. Steverson Moffat, Project Leader
USDA Forest Service
90 Sloan Road
Franklin, NC 28734

Ranger Wilkins and Mr. Moffat,

The mission of Friends of Panthertown is to work in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service to conserve this outstanding natural resource while improving the quality and experience of recreational opportunities in Panthertown Valley.

To be clear and in no uncertain terms, **the Board of Trustees of Friends of Panthertown are FOR improving the quality and experience of recreational opportunities in Panthertown for all who visit, and are strongly AGAINST the proposal to prescribe burn the Little Green Mountain and Blackrock Mountain areas in Panthertown Valley**, two of the most widely used recreational corridors in the popular Panthertown backcountry recreation area.

It is the consensus of our Board that **we respectfully request that you do not burn in either the Little Green Mountain or Blackrock Mountain units in Panthertown Valley.**

While we understand the need for prescribed burns, we would prefer that the Forest Service not burn two of the most popular areas for hiking and recreating in Panthertown Valley, instead focusing your attention on lower use areas. The same number of prescribed burn acres could be accomplished with less negative impact if the Forest Service would focus on more remote, less well-known, less unique, and less used publicly visited portions of the forest.

In 2012 we formally requested you consider alternative locations, such as Big Green Mountain, or other areas in Panthertown that receive less recreational use. We also recognized then that the alternative locations may not have the existing low-cost fire breaks found in the proposed units, and as such we offered and still offer to create any needed fire breaks in alternative areas under the directions of the Forest Service and as part of our volunteer work plan. Friends of Panthertown is also willing to create fire breaks that would enable the Forest Service to not extend the proposed burns up to the existing popular trails, overlooks, and rock outcroppings.

We have studied the ecological impact of the 2014 Big Green Mountain prescribed burn with our resident expert on the biology and botany of Panthertown, Dr. J. Dan Pittillo, A.B., M.S., Ph.D., a retired Professor of Biology who taught plant science and ecology at Western Carolina University for four decades from 1966 to 2004. He served as the Editor of the Chinquapin newsletter for the Southern Appalachian Botanical Society from 1993 to 2012 and directed the Western Carolina University Herbarium from 1970 until his retirement in 2005. Dan is one of the founders of Friends of Panthertown and Panthertown has benefited greatly from his advocacy.

Dan has shared with you his significant concerns for the rock outcrop communities on Little Green Mountain and Blackrock Mountain, and he states that **while control burns have value in forest management, they are not good for recreational area management** such as with these rock outcrop communities that people come to Panthertown specifically to experience.

These treasured and biologically rich recreation areas in Panthertown are cherished by all who visit for the diverse species of native plants that grow here. **Burning on Little Green and Blackrock will result in a great loss.** In 2014 the Big Green burn resulted in some tree kill, especially red maple (*Acer rubrum*), and much of the heath (*Kalmia latifolia*, *Rhododendron* spp.) were top killed. Hiking Big Green Trail (FS 487) through the burned area poses a problem for trail maintenance and is not desirable by hikers interested in the natural blooming vegetation.

As Dan Pittillo states emphatically, on Little Green Mountain, in addition to the spikemoss mats, wildflowers like the colorful tall corydalis (*Capnoides sempervirens*), upland dwarf iris (*Iris verna*), and blue fall asters will be damaged. Then also the low masses of sand myrtle (*Kalmia buxifolium*) blooming in spring with white and pink tinted mountain laurel-like flowers, the mountain laurel (*K. latifolia*), purple rhododendron (*R. catawbiense*), carolina rhododendron (*R. caroliniana*), rosebay rhododendron (*R. maximum*), numerous blueberries (esp. *Vaccinium altomontanum*, *V. corymbosum*), and waxy fragrant huckleberry (*Gaylussacia baccata*) frequented by many native bees, will be lost or at least set back. In Dan Pittillo's own words, **"the natural gardens will be damaged to a disappointed hiker condition. So fires here is not proper management of this natural diverse rock outcrop crowned mountain"**.

On Blackrock Mountain, as with the Big Green Mountain burn which left charred rhododendrons and an open canopy introducing light, we are concerned with the overgrowth of blackberry and green briar that will need to be maintained at our expense along the widely used hiking trails of Blackrock Trail (FS 447), Blackrock Spur Trail (FS 447A), Overlook Trail (FS 491), and Carlton's Way (FS 458). We are also concerned that some of the spring blooming serviceberry (*Amelanchier laevis* and maybe *A. spicata* shrubs) and chokeberry (*Aronia arbutifolia*) are likely to suffer on the Blackrock outcrops. The regional endemic twisted-hair spikemoss (*Bryodesma tortipilum*) will suffer along with other island patches of the Overlook outcrop. Some trees will be killed back, especially red maple that colors well in autumn. But if there is top kill of *Rhododendron vaseyi* (pinkshell azalea), which is likely, then a lot of visitors to these areas will be disappointed and their recreational experiences will be significantly degraded as a result.

Outdoor recreation is a huge economic driver for our region and the Panthertown backcountry recreation area is a prime natural resource in Jackson County. The recently released Outdoor Industry Association's Outdoor Economy Report shows that outdoor recreation in the U.S. generates \$887 billion in consumer spending each year, supporting 7.6 million American jobs — they translate that to \$28 billion in spending in our State, \$8.3 billion in wages and salaries, \$1.3 billion in State and Local tax revenue, and 260,000 direct jobs in North Carolina alone. Maintaining a positive recreational experience in Panthertown directly impacts our region's outdoor economy and ultimately provides for more funding for collaborative conservation efforts.

Finally, we are concerned about the significant and disproportionate size of the proposed prescribed burn areas in Panthertown Valley as compared to the overall acreage of prescribed burns elsewhere in Nantahala National Forest. The proposed burn units add 814 acres to the 497 acres already in the Big Green unit for a total of 1,311 acres, or 20.83% of the 6,295 acres that comprise Panthertown Valley. We hope you will consider not burning these recreational areas.

Respectfully,

Friends of Panthertown Board of Trustees & Staff

/s/ Margaret Carton, President
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