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September 9, 2013

Don Kosetelec and Ryan Sherby  
Southwestern Commission  
125 Bonnie Lane  
Sylva, NC 28779

Dear Don and Ryan:

We are writing to provide comments on the final draft trail plan for the Southwestern Commission region. Our comments are focused on the recommendations in Chapter 6 which propose a course of action for how to establish a route for the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (MST) to connect the Great Smoky Mountain National Park (GSMNP) to the Blue Ridge Parkway (BRP).

Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (FMST) supports a two-route option for the MST in this area with each route being of equal stature. We are concerned that the *Great Smoky route* suggested by the GSMNP (described in your trail plan as Option 1) has so much elevation gain and such difficult resupply options that it will discourage a large percentage of MST hikers from attempting it.

We therefore recommend that a *river valley route* (described in your plan as Option 3) be designated to provide an additional option with less elevation gain and easier resupply. An additional benefit of this route is that it will provide economic value to communities along the route in Swain and Jackson counties.

This *river valley route* would allow hikers to experience 20 miles of trails within the GSMNP as well as a mountain river valley with its farms and small towns. MST hikers report how much they enjoy experiencing the people and landscapes in rural Piedmont and Coastal Plain sections of the trail. This *river valley route* will be the only one that MST hikers experience in the mountains. The existing route of the MST in the mountains follows the BRP and other ridgelines through the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest, rarely following rivers or streams and never entering towns or agricultural valleys.

We also request that the BRP be given additional time to investigate the feasibility of a *Blue Ridge route* flagged by FMST founder Allen DeHart that would more closely approximate the original planned route of the trail from Oconaluftee to Heintooga Road before any decisions are made about designating the *Great Smoky route* as one of the dual-route options. Carolina Mountain Club leaders have spoken to BRP Acting Superintendent Monika Mayr and other BRP staff about this route, and all have agreed to look at it more closely once the new BRP Superintendent starts work. If this route proves feasible, FMST would prefer that this route replace the *Great Smoky route* as one of the two routes for the MST in this area as it provides

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some of the most spectacular views in the mountains and also has less elevation gain and easier resupply than the *Great Smoky route*.

The recommendations in your plan are outlined as four steps. Below we provide additional comments about specific recommendations outlined in each step:

Step 1: Designate the *Great Smoky Route* now.

FMST is supportive of this step only if it is part of a dual route option. If State Parks designates this route, we ask that it only be done with the assurance that the GSMNP, State Parks and BRP will allow an additional route and also allow a shift from this route to the *Blue Ridge route* if that one becomes feasible.

Step 2: Identify the *River Valley Route* as a "Potential Alternate Route" for the MST.

FMST seeks more clarification about what identification as a "potential alternate route" means. We ask that State Parks accord this route the same status that it has the dual routes in the Winston-Salem area which receive equal funding priority, support and publicity.

Step 3: Consider designating the *River Valley Route* as MST when it is complete or near completion.

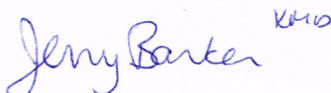
FMST asks that State Parks provide more assurance at this time about its intent to designate the *river valley route* as a dual route of the MST.

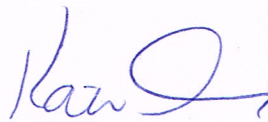
Step 4: Allow for a future option of designating the MST along the original planned *Blue Ridge route*.

FMST requests that the BRP, State Parks and the Cherokee Nation be given additional time to investigate the feasibility of the route flagged by Allen DeHart before any decision is made about designating the *Great Smoky route*. FMST prefers this *Blue Ridge route* over the *Great Smoky route* as the second in a dual-route option.

Thank you again for your work to develop this plan and your efforts to include FMST and other stakeholders in the process. Please let us know if you have questions.

Sincerely,

  
Jerry Barker  
Board President

  
Kate Dixon  
Executive Director

Cc: Lewis Ledford, Director, NC Division of Parks and Recreation  
Darrell McBane, Manager, NC Trails Program  
Dale Ditmanson, Superintendent, Great Smoky Mountain National Park  
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CC (continued):

Melissa Cobern, Backcountry Management Specialist, GSMNP  
Monika Mayr, Acting Superintendent, Blue Ridge Parkway  
Dawn Leonard, Community Planner, Blue Ridge Parkway  
David Anderson, Landscape Architect, Blue Ridge Parkway  
Kevin King, Manager, Swain County  
Ken Mills, Executive Director, Swain County Economic Development Officer  
Chuck Wooten, Manager, Jackson County  
Gerald Green, Planning Director, Jackson County  
Marcia Bromberg, Carolina Mountain Club  
Les Love, Carolina Mountain Club