

Bush pushing public land sale

Some proposed areas in Cherokee National Forest

By **SCOTT BARKER**, barkers@knews.com
February 14, 2006

The Bush administration plans to sell off nearly 3,000 acres of Cherokee National Forest as part of a nationwide land sale to continue a program that provides money for local roads and schools.

The sale, included in President Bush's 2007 budget proposal, would put 300,000 acres of public land on the market.

The National Forest Service predicts the sale would generate \$800 million, though the agency didn't release an estimate for the portion generated by the Cherokee National Forest land.

Money generated from the sale would fund the Secure Rural School and Community Self-Determination program for the next five years. Established in 2000, when the federal government was running a budget surplus, the fund helps pay for roads and schools in communities where national forests are located.

At least one prominent environmental group has come out in opposition to the idea of selling public land to pay for budget initiatives.

The Forest Service has identified 2,996 acres in seven East Tennessee counties to be part of the sale. Cherokee National Forest encompasses 640,000 acres along the North Carolina border.

Forest Service spokesman Terry McDonald said Monday that most of the 38 parcels in East Tennessee are either not contiguous with the rest of the forest or are so isolated they are difficult to manage.

"For the most part, they're surrounded by private lands," McDonald said.

In the past, he said, the Forest Service has swapped non-contiguous tracts for land adjacent to the main body of the forest.

The Forest Service has shared money with communities since 1908 by giving local governments 25 cents of every dollar made from timber sales. The Secure Rural School and Community Self-Determination program was set up because declining timber sales meant some local governments were getting less money.

McDonald said participation in the program is optional. Of the 10 East Tennessee counties that contain Forest Service land, only two - Polk and Monroe - get money from the fund. The other counties opted to keep receiving 25 percent of timber-sale revenues, McDonald said.

The Charlottesville, Va.-based Southern Environmental Law Center opposes selling land to fund the program.

"The federal government should not be in the business of selling off public lands to fund its budget," said Cat McCue, spokeswoman for the center. "It sets a terrible precedent. What are we going to sell off next to pay for government programs?"

McCue said the revenue-sharing program is worthwhile, but the government should find another way to fund it.

"You're not going to get a yield on your investment if you sell off your capital," McCue said.

McDonald emphasized that no land could be sold without Congressional authorization. There will be a 30-day comment period following publication of the proposal in the Federal Register.

Scott Barker may be reached at 865-342-6309.

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