

## **Open letter to Tennessee Trout Unlimited Members:**

### **A brief review of the Tellico OHV area and the Tennessee Council of Trout Unlimited's involvement**

I want to take this opportunity to clarify Trout Unlimited's position on the Tellico OHV area. First, my credentials, I am current State Chairman of the Tennessee Council of Trout Unlimited, former President of the Great Smokey Mountain Chapter and was the Tennessee signatory of the Original Letter of Intent to Sue the US Forest Service last year. I have attended most of the 9 Stakeholder meetings held in late August in Murphy NC by the Forest Service District each year since 1999. Participants included representatives of the NC and TN Trout Unlimited Councils and Chapters, representatives of several 4 Wheel organizations, State Game and Fish officials, various agencies having interest in clean water, representatives of local and state governments, local business people and representatives of at least one US Congressman. Major emphasis was on addressing how to effectively deal with siltation problems and its effect on water quality and aquatic habitat, while maintaining the OHV area. These meetings were initiated and organized at the request of Steve Fry, the then Tennessee State Council Chair. Input from all participants was solicited, welcomed and often put into action.

The first meeting was held to address the problems of siltation of the Tellico River on the Tennessee side of the Mountain. Water quality in those TN streams was being severely degraded. Fish, aquatic resources and other environmental concerns needed examination and detailed study. The Forest Service District Ranger and a TU representative co-chaired the meeting as problems and plans were discussed and all participants were able to give input. Joint cleanup campaigns were initiated. The 4-wheel community assisted the maintenance department of the Forest Service in some trail maintenance. In most meetings an atmosphere of cooperation was evident. The Forest Service hardened many trails, built bridges, culverts, installed water bars and in some instances moved trails to avoid river crossings.

Now to the problem: after 9 years of meetings and studies, a lot of volunteer work and funding by OHV groups, and TU, and a huge expenditure of money by the Forest Service the siltation problem is not fixed, and in many cases may be worse. I have personally made several trips to collect water samples after rain events and can attest that the river is brown for several miles after rains. Details are available on the Forest Service Web site.

Upon examining the Forest management plan, we found that the Forest Service was not following their plan. Often this was the result of prior usage patterns not being changed and sometimes it was just too expensive. In short the silt problem was not getting any better and we decided our only option, after 9 years of trying to cooperatively solve this problem had failed, was to announce our intention to sue the Forest Service if the agency did not address the problem. Our requests: simply follow the rules within the Forest

Plan, and comply with existing TN and NC state water quality laws, and Federal Clean Water Act legislation!

As a result of our notice, the Forest Service finally took action, closing all Trails in the winter (usual in most Forests) and closing for one year three of the most severely degraded trails. They have spent over \$300,000 studying the problem and are now in the midst of developing the new management plans thru the Environmental Assessment process. I have attended at least 7 meetings with the Forest Service at their State Office in Asheville in the past year. Several on these meetings included representatives of the 4 Wheel communities. We applaud the efforts of the Forest Service and some of the 4 wheel clubs in their efforts to alleviate the problem.

TU along with PEER, Wildsouth and SELC are only asking that the siltation problem be fixed and have never asked, nor is it our desire, that all trails be closed. We believe in joint usage and are happy for the off road trails to be open if they can be managed in such a manner that erosion and siltation are not a problem. Much of the information posted on the 4 wheel web sites about our motives is incorrect. Some of the incorrect information is due to the writer not knowing the history of efforts to cooperatively fix the problem and some of the misinformation is intentional to stir trouble.

The SFWDA suit against the Forest Service is an attempt to delay the current USFS decisions and prevent the agency from enforcing its rules prior to the completion of the lengthy Environmental Assessment Process, and to short stop any scientific examination of the current practices. We regret that SFWDA has taken this issue to court, but we know the law is clear- the Forest Service is required to take action to stop siltation of these streams.

Our preference is for the Forest Service to continue their efforts and studies, which will enable them to develop science/fact-based information for the development of the Management Plan for the Tellico OHV Trail system.

We will not be cowed or deterred by threats, insults or mis-information, we are only asking the USFS to follow the rules!

George Lane  
Tennessee Council Trout Unlimited  
Chair