

Forest Service holds live-fire testing at proposed range site

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Law enforcement officers and members of the Union County Gun Club joined the U.S. Forest Service for live-fire testing at the proposed shooting range site on Dec. 11. Photo by Mark Smith

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Union County Sheriff Mack Mason, several deputies and about 30 Union County Gun Club members gathered near the proposed site of the Gun Club shooting range for a live-fire sound analysis on Tuesday, Dec. 11.

The proposed site is on Georgia 180, just over five miles from the SR 180/Gainesville Highway intersection, across from Bob Creek Road/Forest Service Road 292.

Present at the sound analysis were several

representatives with the U.S. Forest Service, including District Ranger Andy Baker of the Blue Ridge Ranger District; Public Affairs Officer Steven Bekkerus; Forest Environmental Coordinator Nelson Gonzalez-Sullow; Acting Special Uses Program Manager Jerome Bennett; and Natural Resources Specialist Josh O'Neal.

Krishna Faw of Nutter and Associates, Inc., also attended as an environmental consultant to the Forest Service.

At 11 a.m., the group gathered for a briefing. Five of the club members who

had volunteered to fire their weapons for the sound analysis at the proposed gun range site split off for a briefing with Faw, who coordinated the firing.

Other club members broke up into teams with Sheriff Mason, the deputies, and the Forest Service personnel to distribute a questionnaire, interview nearby residents during and after the live-fire testing, and to listen from predetermined vantage points.

There were people stationed about a mile away on the Appalachian Trail, listening for gunfire at the Trail's nearest

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point to the proposed gun range, and they were in contact with Forest Service personnel by radio.

The five shooters each had a pistol and a rifle and were instructed to load, make ready to fire and fire only on command. The reason for both pistols and long guns is that long guns tend to be louder than pistols, and both required testing.

Once everyone was in place, firing began at noon sharp. A total of 32 pistol shots were fired in two minutes and four seconds, and 17 rifle shots were fired in one minute and 54 seconds.

When the firing finished, everybody met back at Forest Service Road 292 for a debriefing.

There did not appear to be any complaints from any residents near or far, and no one on any of the teams reported any excessive noise from their vantage points.

The purpose, said Bekkerus, was to do a sound analysis based on topography and acoustical features, which is based on scientific modeling, because someone at the Oct. 24 meeting had asked if they would do a live-fire exercise.

"This was a chance for residents to actually hear an example of live-fire and determine, 'Can I actually hear this from my porch or not?'" said Bekkerus, adding that it's a way for residents to share their observations directly with the Forest Service.

Continued Bekkerus, "After we did that first



U.S. Marine Corps Veteran and Union County Gun Club member Wayne Roshaven helping out during the live-fire testing. Photo by Mark Smith

exercise (in October), we had subsequent requests from some of the folks that help manage the Appalachian Trail. They asked us to do it again, because the first time they were not up there on top of the ridgeline, which is in the zone of influence.

"This month, the contractor is working up a report that summarizes all the comments that we receive, and it'll be categorized by issue. For somebody just said, 'I'm not for this,' and they didn't give us a reason, well, it gets thrown out."

For his part, Sheriff Mason said he thinks the range will be good for a number of reasons, especially for the young people of the county, and by extension, the country.

"For our national defense, we need people interested in firearms," said Mason. "We need people trained to know how to use them."

"And then, your law enforcement officers and the sheriff's office, we have no city, county or state or federal-owned property that we can go and qualify like we're required to do by law." Law enforcement officers are required to target shoot monthly to stay in practice.

Bekkerus concluded with the comment that having this facility will reduce the number of people going out into the national forest to practice shooting, where there are no range rules or safety berms, which can be dangerous.