

# Target Range another step closer as Forest Service solicits more feedback

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The U.S. Forest Service held its second public meeting on the proposed Union County Target Range at the Pat Haralson Memorial Civic Center on Thursday, May 30.

The Union County Gun Club, in partnership with the Forest Service, which falls under the umbrella of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is spearheading the effort for the creation of the target range, located about five miles east of US 19/129 South on Georgia 180.

Sheriff Mack Mason and several of his deputies, as well as several Blairsville Police Department officers, attended the meeting, not because they expected trouble, but because they don't have an ideal place to qualify with their firearms and would like to see a range in Union County.

State Director Joyce White of USDA Rural Development, Blue Ridge District Ranger Andy Baker of the Forest Service, several other Forest Service officials, and most of the Gun Club Board of Directors were present as well.

Over 100 county residents attended the meeting, where it was announced that there are now approximately 500 charter members of the Gun Club, highlighting the local interest and passion for a target range.

Sheriff Mason spoke briefly to the gathering, saying that the project to create a public range started on July 10, 2017, when over 150 people signed up to be members in the first club meeting.

"The main goal that we had was to try to find a place for a public range here where we wouldn't be infringing on anybody's rights," said Mason, adding that, all things considered, the best option turned out to be partnering with the Commissioner Lamar Paris' office and the Forest Service to create a range on public land.

"I'm just beside myself that we've got almost 500 people that have stepped out on faith like I asked them to, to join this club and pay their dues, and we don't have a place to shoot," said Mason, who advises the Gun Club. "This country, this nation, is in dire straits."

"We need to raise up people that want to learn shooting skills, then your self-defense skills. We need to be able to utilize our Second Amendment rights."

Ranger Baker then took the podium and began his presentation.

"The main purpose of today, from the Forest Service perspective, is to share with you the purpose and need for the original proposal as it was shared with us by Union County," said Baker. "And then, we want to explain to you the process we have to go through."

"NEPA - National En-

vironmental Policy Act - is an Act we have to follow. Anytime we propose new construction on federal property, whether it's a trail, campground, timber sale or, in this case, a recreational shooting range, this is the process we go through."

Baker said that, since the first public meeting in the fall of 2018, they are now at about the half-way point in that process. Currently, he said, they are about halfway through a 30-day public comment period.

"Whether you're for or against or not sure, whatever your opinion is or your thoughts are on this proposal, this is your opportunity to give that to us," said Baker. "Not at this meeting, necessarily, but this meeting is to share with you how you can give us that information."

"And, as I shared at the meeting last fall, our NEPA decisions are not a vote - it's not a popular vote. It's about the best science, the best public information we can get."

"So, the more you share with us specifically about the project and how it impacts you, then that's what we need to hear."

When the 30-day comment period is up, Baker said the Forest Service will take all feedback and look it over one last time before finalizing the environmental assessment.

"So, that's where we are - we're not at a decision point on this proposal," Baker said.

A draft Environmental Analysis has been completed and is now ready for public review and comment at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=54559>.

"We will respond to every significant issue that's raised," said Baker, not necessarily on an individual basis, but by category, he added.

A question and answer period took place after Baker's



U.S. Forest Service Blue Ridge District Ranger Andy Baker in a Target Range Public Meeting on May 30. Photo by Mark Smith.

presentation, where several questions from the audience were fielded by Baker and Mason.

Joyce White said that her boss, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Purdue - formerly the governor of Georgia - wanted to make sure the environmental analysis and supporting documentation were done properly.

"He said, 'Joyce, just follow it, because that's a good use of the property. It's the people's land, and that would be a good use for that land. So, just follow it,'" said White. "And so, I have kept in touch."

"I'm excited about it, though. I think there is a need. I mean, when you have 500 people that have signed up and there's not even a range, that tells you it's not just a want, it's a need."

"When they put their money down with nothing to show for it, yet they believe in it, they need it, they're looking forward to it. And I look forward to seeing the people get good use out of what they pay for in their tax dollars."



Union County Sheriff Mack Mason in the well-attended Target Range Public Meeting last week at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center. Photo by Mark Smith.