

Baker says no 'hard stops' on range proposal so far

By Shawn Jarrard
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It was all good news for advocates of the proposed Union County Target Range off SR 180 in a public meeting dedicated to the project on Wednesday, Oct. 24.

Representatives of the U.S. Forest Service and Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris jointly conducted the hearing at the School Fine Arts Center, with assistance from Sheriff Mack Mason and members of the Union County Gun Club.

More than 200 people attended the meeting, including Gun Club members as well as property owners invited by the Forest Service for having land near the proposed range site.

Blue Ridge District Ranger Andy Baker led a presentation that evening in which he shared a design concept of the proposed target

range. Central to the concept were both rifle and pistol ranges, bathrooms, a clubhouse, ample parking, and an area marked off for potential future expansion of the range.

"This is off 180, also known as the Richard Russell Scenic Byway, in Union County," said Baker. "You have a proposed road off of 180, so we'll be reconstructing a road because of some of the safety issues with the existing road."

Continued Baker: "You see the areas of open, grassy field — that's an old wildlife opening. It's got trees growing up in it, and some of those will have to be removed, but the majority of the area is already cleared where the actual range is being proposed."

"There will be a 200-yard length rifle range, and then a shorter pistol range. You also see some restrooms, some storage facilities, and you'll see

20-foot earthen berms around the perimeter of all the range. That is a safety requirement."

According to Baker, the biggest obstacles initially faced by projects such as this are noise and proximity to nearby water sources.

Fortunately for the project, Baker was able to report that the recently conducted "Shooting Range Noise Acoustical Analysis" had come back with favorable results, and that the range concept takes into account adequate buffers between it and a nearby stream.

"Noise and water, not the only things we're considering, but the two things we're taking a hard look at in the very front end of this project," said Baker.

"If we can't mitigate those, we have a hard stop, and so, right now, we don't have any hard stops on this proposal. Not to say there won't be, but those are the things we're looking

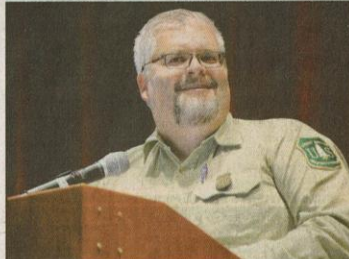
at first."

The results of the acoustical study and all other publicly available documents related to the project can be found on the project page at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=54559>.

Further studies will include live-fire acoustical analysis, the date and time of which "will be provided to all who comment on the project with their contact information, and will also be posted on the project webpage," according to the Forest Service.

Currently, the Forest Service is soliciting public comment as part of the project's initial "Public Scoping Period," after which the Environmental Analysis portion of the project can begin.

"The more specific that you make (your comments), the better that's going to help us," said Baker. "Obviously, you have the God-given right to say



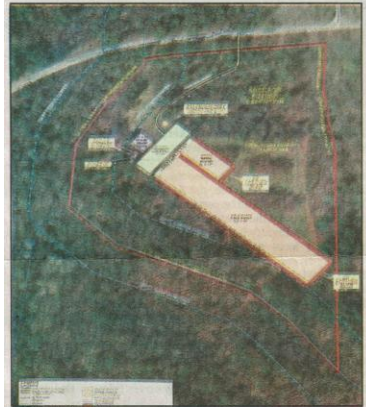
District Ranger Andy Baker in the Target Range public meeting on Wednesday, Oct. 24. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

I'm against or for this project. Is that really going to help us a lot in the Environmental Analysis? No. "I need to know what specific things you're concerned about and how this would

impact you, your property, whatever the relationship is you have with this project. That's really going to help us be responsive to your needs.

"So, please, if you write See Range, Page 3A

Range...continued from Page 1A



The proposed shooting range located off SR 180 in Union County.

comments to us, make them specific, put some thought into them. And understand that, when you do, they're part of the public record."

In order to meet the deadline and "establish standing for objection eligibility," scoping comments must be received by Nov. 13, 2018.

Comments can be submitted at the project page listed above; mailed to Andrew L. Baker, District Ranger, ATTN: Nelson Gonzalez-Sullow and/or Jerome Bennett, Chattahoochee-

Oconee National Forests, 1755 Cleveland Highway, Gainesville, GA 30501; or by fax at 770-297-3011.

As previously stated, following the Public Scoping Period, the Forest Service will conduct an Environmental Analysis at the proposed target range site, which, when coupled with a series of future public comment periods, will likely result in a final decision being reached by late Summer 2019.

Starting mid-November, the Forest Service will begin a four to six-month process

with the actual Environmental Analysis, or EA.

The EA will include examination by specialists on potential impacts to: soil, water and air quality; cultural and historical resources; local flora and fauna, with an eye toward threatened, endangered or sensitive species and special habitats; nearby residents; traffic in the area; other people using Forest Service land recreationally; and overall safety.

When that part of the project is complete, a draft analysis will be put before the public for another 30-day comment period, before a finalized version of the analysis is subjected to an additional 30 days of public comment followed by a 45-day Objection Period.

"So, we have this scoping period we're in now that helps us fine-tune the concept," said Baker. "Are there things we're not thinking about right now, that we're not considering in our environmental analysis? That's what the scoping period is for."

"Then, once the EA is done, you'll have another opportunity to comment. And once we finalize the EA and we respond to all the public comments, there's still one last Objection Period — this is an administrative appeal, if you will, and it basically allows you the option to object to this project."

"If you've looked through the Environmental Analysis and you still don't agree with what we've done, you have the opportunity to object, and then my boss will sit down with objectors and see if we can come to a satisfactory conclusion. If we can't or if we do, we will publish that final decision."

Following Baker's presentation, he and Commissioner Paris took turns answering numerous questions from the audience, many of which revolved around specifics that will be determined when the project is further along.

Concerning a potential skeet shooting range for shotguns, Paris said there simply wasn't adequate room at

on that," said Paris. "We've got some things in mind, but we don't have anything concrete. We do have a place for our 4-H kids to shoot skeet. Other than them, the biggest request is for a rifle and pistol range."

According to the official Project Proposal Description, Union County Government would be the primary permit holder for the range, and would assume "the responsibility of funding, maintenance and operation," though the Union County Gun Club would be in charge of the "day to day operation of the target range."

Joyce White, who is the Georgia State Director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development, also attended the Oct. 24 meeting.

Folks interested in learning more about the project can attend the Gun Club Annual Meeting on Thursday, Nov. 1, at 6 p.m. inside the Blairsville Civic Center.

The Gun Club now boasts at least 414 members and can be found online at UnionCountyGunClub.org or com.



More than 200 people attended the Target Range meeting at the Union County School Fine Arts Center.