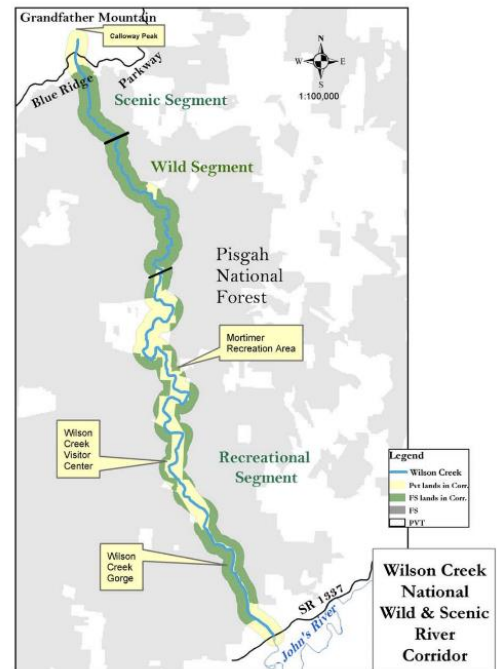


Background: A 23.3-mile mountain stream, Wilson Creek, was added to the National Wild and Scenic River System in 2000. Much of Wilson Creek lies within the Pisgah National Forest. The stream starts atop 5,920-foot-high Grandfather Mountain, 100 yards above the Blue Ridge Parkway. As its headwaters rush through the Blue Ridge Mountains, the stream drops over 85 feet per mile creating dangerous rapids ranging from Class II to V and at one point, it drops 200-feet into a deep gorge of granite bedrock.

Forty-nine thousand acres of wilderness comprise the Wilson Creek area, which consists of U.S. Forest Service (USFS) land and private land held in conservation. This land is managed by the USFS, the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC), and Caldwell County. Access to this area is provided by Brown Mountain Beach Road (SR 1328), in most areas, a single-lane gravel road.

The USFS has a Cooperative Law Enforcement Agreement with Caldwell County in which they pay the County \$12,500 per year for law enforcement assistance. However, the County can spend up to \$18,000 in just one weekend on law enforcement personnel and spends over \$60,000 annually on Wilson Creek related law enforcement activities. With escalating usage and related difficulties, the County projects it will spend at least \$110,000 in 2024 solely on Wilson Creek law enforcement activities.

Threats: Touted as one of North Carolina’s most pristine and rugged terrains, Wilson Creek’s recreational area is attracting an ever-increasing number of visitors. This rising popularity, fueled by proximity to the highly populated areas of Charlotte, Raleigh, and the Interstate 40 corridor, and relatively easy access to the forests via SR 1328, has resulted in an ecologically unsustainable level of use.



The influx of crowds has created significant traffic, litter, and human waste issues. On fair weather weekends, more than 460 cars claim spots along a two-mile stretch of SR 1328. Legal parking spots are limited to 141 spaces. Once those fill, visitors park illegally, blocking road access for first responders and local residents.

By the end of a peak-season day, dumpsters are heaped with bags of trash, piles of spent charcoal, scraps of food, and empty cans of soda and beer, and far more is left behind where it falls, creating issues for wildlife and visitors. Caldwell County hauls away well over 35,000 pounds of trash per year. In addition, the nonprofit volunteer organization A Clean Wilson Creek hauled away over 11,000 pounds of trash in 2023 alone, and more than 75,000 pounds since 2019.





Human waste is also a problem. Within the entire Wilson Creek day-use area there are just two toilets, except on holiday weekends when the USFS sets up portable toilets in the river corridor. With the absence of facilities, many visitors simply make use of the outdoors. Conditions have grown so extreme that A Clean Wilson Creek has been forced to cancel scheduled cleanup activities due to biologically hazardous conditions.

Heavy use impacts the streambank's ecology in its fragile riparian zone. Improvised user trails and picnic areas disrupt the terrain along the riverbed, uprooting and diminishing vegetation, increasing runoff, and creating instability. The runoff transports heavier than usual sediment loads that threaten the existing ecosystem by causing the formation of sandbars, gravel beds, and muddy flats.

Overuse of the Wilson Creek Wild and Scenic River area endangers public safety. Crowds hinder emergency response capabilities for first responders, including search and rescue teams, by blocking the sole access road into the gorge. Drownings of ill-prepared river users and incidents requiring remote rescues are on the rise. Violations of wildlife, fishing, alcohol, and fire regulations are increasing, as are incidents of graffiti, vandalism, and other civil disturbances.



Solutions: Wilson Creek Wild and Scenic River area proudly serves a diverse community of users. Ensuring future generations of all forest users can continue to enjoy this natural treasure is a top priority for Caldwell County. The county joined with the USFS and other stakeholder groups to help produce the Wilson Creek Action Plan, which addresses some of these issues. The Action Plan is an important step in the right direction, but its proposed solutions are not projected to begin construction until August 2025 at the earliest. In the meantime, the ecosystem of the Wilson Creek Wild and Scenic River area needs immediate protection from the impacts of overuse.

Caldwell County requests the USFS, NCDOT and other stakeholders to work collaboratively to establish solutions that can be implemented immediately and continue through the implementation of the Action Plan. Creating a partnership with all levels of government would serve as a national model for other natural sites starting to experience similar difficulties.

Caldwell County is working to identify and implement strategies that will help the ecosystem recover and improve public safety. Suggested solutions include:

- Providing a federal law enforcement presence in the Wilson Creek Wild and Scenic River area;
- Limiting area use by implementing user fees and/or visitor access systems (i.e. www.recreation.gov);
- Revising regulations to ban all fires, and require personal flotation devices; and,
- Adding more bilingual signage.

Caldwell County respectfully requests language in the Environment and Interior Appropriations bill to direct the USFS to improve management of forest ecosystem resources throughout the Wilson Creek Wild and Scenic River area.

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