

SANDY MUSH FOREST RESTORATION COALITION

Action Plan for Conservation



Photo: Mark VanDyke

WHO WE ARE

The Sandy Mush Forest Restoration Coalition was formed to address the need for forest restoration activities in Sandy Mush. The Coalition is governed by consent-based decision making, wherein any activities enacted by, or on behalf of, the Coalition is within the range of tolerance of all members. The Coalition coordinator is the Forest Stewards Guild with its backbone support members being the Forest Stewards Guild, EcoForesters, and the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy. The Coalition is comprised of family forest landowners, Sandy Mush community members, natural resource professionals, and environmental nonprofit organizations.

Vision

Healthy and resilient forests that protect water resources, natural assets, cultural heritage, economic opportunities, and quality of life for Sandy Mush community residents.

Mission

Increase support for forest restoration activities in Sandy Mush by increasing communication, educational opportunities, coordination, and success among community members, and to connect family forest landowners to resources to support and sustain forest restoration into the future.



Sandy Mush Watershed

WHY SANDY MUSH?

Sandy Mush occupies a 51,000-acre watershed-level geography in western North Carolina and is a high-priority area for the conservation of natural and cultural heritage. As a focal area for timber production due to its rich cove forests, much of the forestland in Sandy Mush has been harvested heavily at some point in its past and needs some degree of forest restoration to promote biodiversity and ecosystem health. With limited economic resources, many landowners don't have the disposable income necessary to invest in forest stewardship activities to promote forest health and restore native habitat.

Sandy Mush is a very ideologically diverse community, with a combination of both newer landowners and long-time farming families that hold varied goals for their forestland. While many families living within the greater Sandy Mush watershed have resided in the community for generations, both newcomers and longtime residents have a strong sense of place that drives their passion for being good stewards to their land. The love of the countryside, appreciation of native flora and fauna, and ability to rely on ecosystem services are all reasons why people are interested in participating in the Coalition.

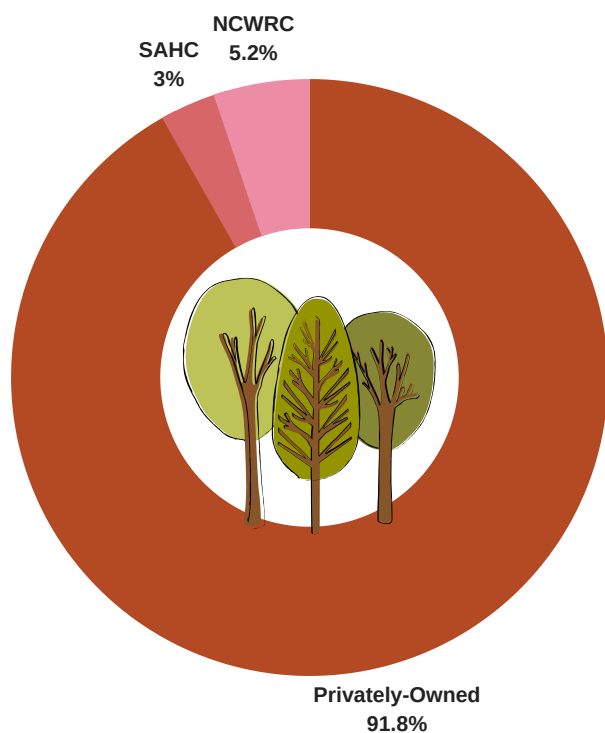


THREATS TO FORESTS IN SANDY MUSH

Within the Sandy Mush watershed, forests are valued or utilized by several stakeholders, including those that own forestland and those that benefit from or desire healthy and productive forestland. Most of the forestland is owned by family forest landowners that hold diverse social, ecological, and economical goals for their forests.

The following threats have been identified by the Coalition as the largest negative influences on achieving our vision:

- Land-use change
- The presence of different species and influx of invasive plants
- Extreme weather patterns: floods, wildfires, and droughts
- Habitat loss
- Lack of land management
- Commercial development



Forestland ownership in the Sandy Mush watershed
NCWRC = NC Wildlife Resources Commission

OUR APPROACH

Using the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation, we developed a mission-focused Action Plan to serve as a framework for the restoration and conservation of forests in Sandy Mush. Information was gathered from Coalition meetings that occurred in Fall 2019 and Spring 2020.



OUR STRATEGIES

To maximize effectiveness, we've decided to address the threats to Sandy Mush forests through six strategies. The strategies identified are most closely related to the Coalition's mission and are most feasible for the Coalition to accomplish.

1

Control invasive exotic plants, pests, and pathogens

This strategy involves reducing the scope and severity of invasive exotic plants, pests, and pathogens in the forests of Sandy Mush. Through strategically selecting sites where restoration efforts can be most impactful and educating the community in invasive control activities, the Coalition will reach the goal of decreasing the scope and severity of invasives. Two examples of invasive species of concern in Sandy Mush include Oriental bittersweet and Hemlock Woolly Adelgid.

2

Ensure community wildfire resilience and increase capacity for prescribed fire

This strategy aims to increase community awareness on the benefits of ecologically appropriate fire and ensure community preparedness for wildfire events. Ecologically appropriate fire is important to forest health as it can promote native fire-dependent species such as shortleaf pine and limit the number of catastrophic wildfire events by reducing fuel loading.

3

Create demonstration sites that exemplify forest restoration practices

This strategy will address the feasibility of ecological restoration and showcase best practices relating to silviculture and forest operations and management. Through on-the-ground demonstration, community members will be able to witness the process of ecological forest restoration practices and their outcomes.

Promote neighbor-to-neighbor learning networks and increase communication between community members and stakeholders

This strategy focuses on improving the pathways of communication between community members and stakeholders within and outside the Coalition. This strategy will also address the need to leverage current avenues of communication such as the Sandy Mush Community Center, as well as create new ones such as a Coalition webpage.

Promote forest operations and management that is aligned with ecological goals

This strategy primarily focuses on enabling the Sandy Mush community to practice ecological forestry through timber management. As lack of land management is one of the top identified direct threats to reaching the Coalition's vision of restoring healthy and resilient forests in Sandy Mush, this strategy will connect family forest landowners to resources that will allow for active land management. This strategy will also increase awareness of ecological forest management and other alternative forest-based revenue streams.

Tell the story of the land and share information about forest-based heritage

This strategy aims to engage community members in the forest history of Sandy Mush through sharing forest-based heritage knowledge to audiences both inside and outside of the community. Through engaging community members across generations, this strategy will work to achieve reaching the goals associated with the human wellbeing targets.

NEXT STEPS

- Identify parties responsible for the implementation of specific activities
- Continue to hold Coalition meetings on a quarterly basis to adapt the plan as needed

