



FALL 2024
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PRODUCED FOR:

Carolina Land and Lakes
Resource Conservation and
Development

United States Forest Service
Pisgah National Forest
Grandfather Ranger District



PRODUCED BY:

Destination by Design



PROJECT OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE:

- Carolina Land & Lakes - Resource Conservation and Development
- US Forest Service
- American Whitewater
- A Clean Wilson Creek
- Caldwell County Chamber of Commerce
- Caldwell County Planning Department
- Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina
- G5 Trail Collective
- Latinos Aventureros en las Carolinas
- North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission
- Northwest NC Mountain Bike Alliance
- Wild South

INTRODUCTION



The Wilson Creek Action Plan provides a vision for future outdoor recreation infrastructure development along Wilson Creek. The project study area, located in Caldwell County, North Carolina, stretches approximately nine miles in length and includes the Wilson Creek Wild and Scenic River corridor from Adako Road to NC 90 at Mortimer. Carolina Land and Lakes Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D), in cooperation with the United States Forest Service (USFS), is funding and leading the effort.

PLAN GOALS



ANALYSIS: Conduct a thorough assessment of the study area to evaluate significant opportunities and constraints for outdoor recreation infrastructure development.



COMMUNITY: Engage stakeholders, government and community leaders, and the public to encourage collaborative efforts and promote a shared vision that will support organizational and community goals.



EXPERIENCE: Create an environmentally, socially, economically, and managerially sustainable experience that provides equitable access for all.



EDUCATION: Encourage advocacy, stewardship, and appropriate use for protection of and access to the natural environment.



PUBLIC SAFETY: Guide and disperse use through infrastructure development that provides a safe experience and adequate access for emergency response.

BACKGROUND

Wilson Creek stretches approximately 23 miles from the mountains to the foothills of western North Carolina. The river, from its headwaters in Avery County to its confluence with the Johns River in Caldwell County, was added to the National Wild and Scenic River System on August 18, 2000.

Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina (FCNC) and other partners with interests in the river corridor have worked together to protect lands and educate the public about the natural resources found along Wilson Creek. Through grant funding and generous private landowner donations, FCNC has acquired over 1,500 acres of protected land in the last 20 years that links Pisgah National Forest to the Wilson Creek corridor.

With the addition of protected lands and increased accessibility to Wilson Creek, recreational use in the corridor has steadily increased. The number of visitors and vehicles consistently surpasses the capacity of existing parking areas and other outdoor recreation infrastructure within the corridor. The significant amount of use creates a number of challenges for visitor and natural resource management.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



Significant efforts were made to introduce the project to the public and engage community members and stakeholders.

WEBSITE & SURVEY

A project specific website, hosted by G5 Trail Collective, was developed to inform the public and stakeholders about the Action Plan. A project fact sheet provided information about the planning effort in English and Spanish. The website provided a link to a community survey, which received 627 comments. Approximately 65% of respondents were local (Lenoir, Morganton, Granite Falls, Linville, Boone, and Marion). The remaining 35% of responses came from other communities in the Mountains and Piedmont.

PROJECT OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

Members of the Project Oversight Committee guided the planning process and included representatives from the US Forest Service, Carolina Land and Lakes Resource Conservation and Development, A Clean Wilson Creek, American Whitewater, Caldwell County Chamber of Commerce, Caldwell County Planning Department, Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina, G5 Trail Collective, Latinos Aventureros en las Carolinas, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, Northwest North Carolina Mountain Bike Alliance, Trout Unlimited, and Wild South.

STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

Project partners also conducted meetings with three key stakeholder groups: NC Wildlife Resources Commissions, local Law Enforcement and Emergency Medical Services, and landowners that lived within the Wilson Creek corridor. Key take-aways are listed below.

- Recreation in the headwaters and upper corridor should focus on dispersed uses like hiking, mountain biking, and fishing.
- Infrastructure that provides turn-around areas for emergency vehicles is needed.
- Access and parking areas should be identified and signed.
- Litter pick-up, collection, and human waste management are significant issues.
- Additional road maintenance is needed.
- Rule and regulation enforcement responsibilities by various agency Law Enforcement officers is unclear to the public.
- Concerns about long-term sustainability of current management, use, and environmental protection exist.



GENERAL CORRIDOR RECOMMENDATIONS



General corridor recommendations address improvements for visitor orientation, experience, and safety. Each public land manager will determine which recommendations can be implemented on their lands based on agency policy and guidelines.

VISITOR ORIENTATION

- Offer regional wayfinding information at key visitor orientation areas and information specific to the Wilson Creek corridor at trailhead kiosks.
- Clearly define public land boundaries along Brown Mountain Beach Road.

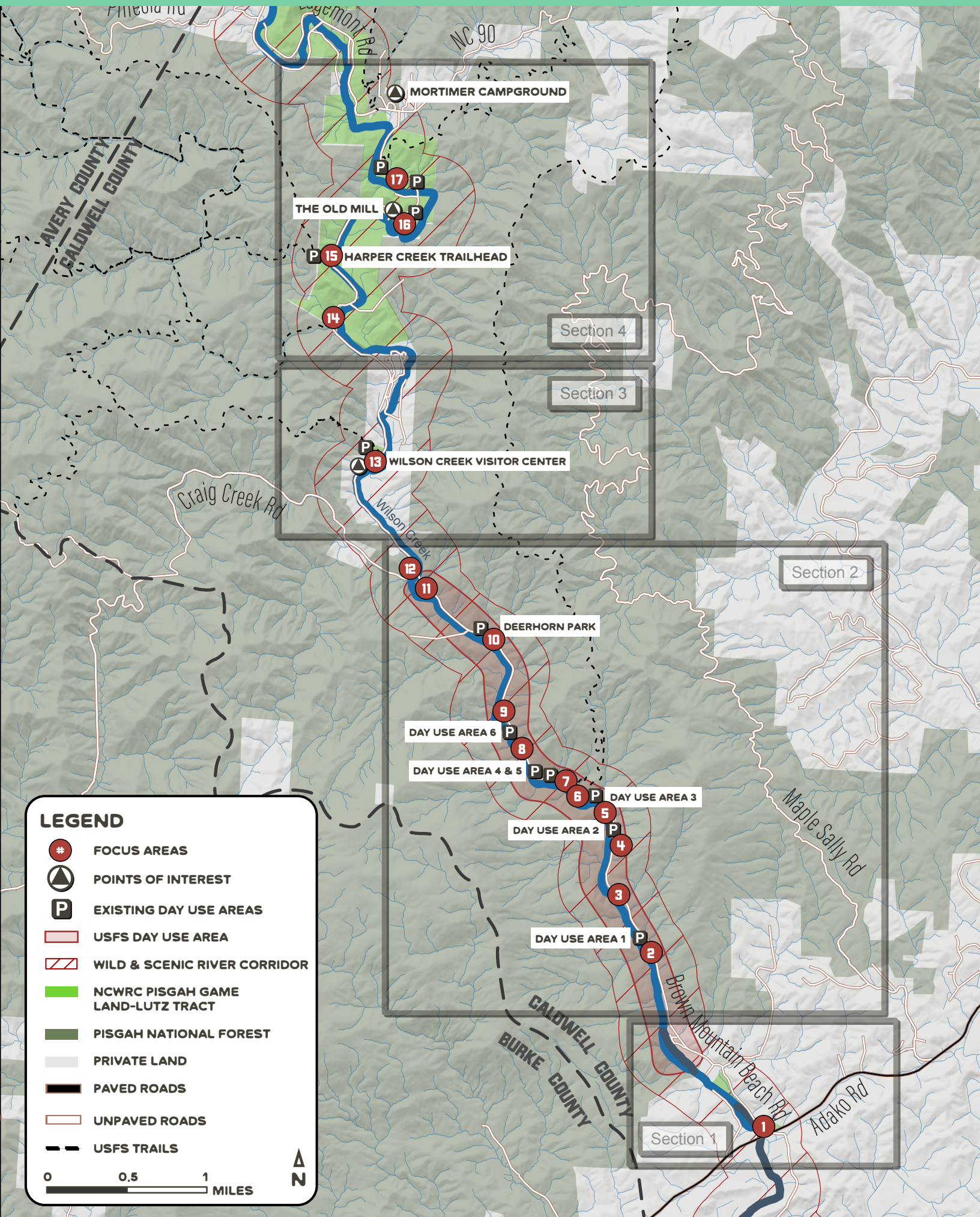
VISITOR EXPERIENCE

- Concentrate infrastructure development into “focus areas”.
- Disperse focus areas along the length of the study area.
- Provide parking, vault toilets, and bear-proof trash cans at each focus area in the USFS day-use area to address waste management.
- Follow USFS facility design guidelines to minimize visual impacts to visitors on Wilson Creek and Brown Mountain Beach Road.
- Explore trail connectivity between focus areas to provide visitors with multiple options to access the river and adjacent public lands.

VISITOR SAFETY

- Use consistent and standard design specifications for focus areas.
- Define each parking space (10 feet X 22 feet) with wheel stops.
- Include signage with site name and allowable use symbols at each focus area.
- Maintain a consistent road width (20 feet) for the length of the corridor
- Provide reserved parking spaces and turn-around areas for law enforcement and emergency management that is physically separated from visitor parking.
- Eliminate parking in non-designated areas using boulders, guardrails, and road realignment.
- Advocate for a lower speed limit.

OVERVIEW OF PLANNING SECTIONS AND FOCUS AREAS



SITE SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS



Site specific recommendations highlight outdoor recreation infrastructure development for specific focus areas within the Wilson Creek corridor. The matrix below provides the responsible land manager, site classification, existing and proposed amenities, and number of existing parking spaces for each focus area. It also includes existing and proposed parking spaces and an estimate of probable cost. The project oversight committee determined implementation priority for each focus area.

Site plans for four high-priority focus areas are included after the matrix. Site plans for all focus areas can be found in the full plan document.

| | LAND MANAGER | SITE CLASSIFICATION | AMENITIES | EXISTING PARKING* | PROPOSED PARKING | PRIORITY | ESTIMATE OF PROBABLE COST |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|---|----------------------|---------------------|----------|------------------------------|
| PLANNING SECTION 1: | | | | | | | |
| Focus Area 1: Adako | NCWRC ** | Visitor Orientation Area | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none">Non-designated ParkingNatural Surface Trail leading to Wilson Creek Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none">Gateway Sign3-Panel Informational Kiosk with Temporary ParkingEmergency Management Staging Area/Recreational Use Parking | 0 | 17 | High | \$334,112 |
| PLANNING SECTION 2 (CONT'D): | | | | | | | |
| Focus Area 2: Lower Gorge | USFS | River Access Trailhead | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none">Developed River Access (2)RestroomBear-Proof Trash Cans Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none">Changing RoomPaddler Loading ZoneEmergency Services Parking | 21 | 15 | Medium | \$508,772 |
| Focus Area 3: Bathtub | USFS | River Access Trailhead | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none">Dispersed River Access (2) Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none">RestroomChanging RoomBear-Proof Trash CansEmergency Services Parking | 18 | 14 | Medium | \$459,122 |
| Focus Area 4: Middle Gorge | USFS | River Access Trailhead | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none">Developed and Dispersed River Access Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none">RestroomBear-Proof Trash Cans | 16 | 23 | Medium | \$459,122 |

| | LAND MANAGER | SITE CLASSIFICATION | AMENITIES | EXISTING PARKING* | PROPOSED PARKING | PRIORITY | ESTIMATE OF PROBABLE COST |
|---|-----------------|---------------------------|--|----------------------|---------------------|----------|------------------------------|
| PLANNING SECTION 2 (CONT'D): | | | | | | | |
| Focus Area 5: Thunderhole | USFS | River Access Trailhead | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed River Access Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dispersed Picnic Area Restroom Changing Room Bear-Proof Dumpster | 8 | 10 | Medium | \$447,938 |
| Focus Area 6: Wilson Ridge | USFS | River Access Trailhead | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trail Access Dispersed River Access Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1-Panel Kiosk Restroom Changing Room Bear-Proof Trash Cans | 13 | 21 | Low | \$487,494 |
| Focus Area 7: Lady on the Rock | USFS | Developed Site | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed River Access Dispersed River Access (4) Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ADA Viewing Platform ADA Riverside Parking Restroom Bear-Proof Trash Cans Emergency Services Parking | 32 | 26 | High | \$540,417 |
| Focus Area 8: Paddler Put In | USFS | River Access Trailhead | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed River Access Dispersed River Access (3) Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paddler Loading/Unloading Zone Restroom Changing Room Bear-Proof Trash Can Emergency Services Parking | 11 | 10 | High | \$402,380 |
| Focus Area 9: Creekside | USFS | Developed Site | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dispersed River Access Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dispersed Picnic Area Restroom Changing Room Bear-Proof Dumpster | 12 | 30 | Low | \$550,783 |

| | LAND MANAGER | SITE CLASSIFICATION | AMENITIES | EXISTING PARKING* | PROPOSED PARKING | PRIORITY | ESTIMATE OF PROBABLE COST |
|--|--------------------|--------------------------------|--|----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|------------------------------|
| PLANNING SECTION 2 (CONT'D): | | | | | | | |
| Focus Area 10: Deerhorn | Caldwell County | Developed Site | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dispersed River Access Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed ADA River Access Picnic Shelters (2) Dispersed Picnic Area Event Lawn Restroom Changing Room Bear-Proof Trash Cans and Dumpster Emergency Services Parking Road Realignment | 10 | 40 | High | \$2,364,101 |
| Focus Area 11: Confluence | USFS | Developed Site | Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dispersed Picnic Area Developed ADA River Access Dispersed River Access Restroom Changing Room Bear-Proof Trash Cans and Dumpster | 0 | 28 | High | \$847,453 |
| Focus Area 12: Craig Creek | USFS | Visitor Orientation Area | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dispersed River Access Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3-Panel Informational Kiosk With Temporary Parking Bear-Proof Dumpster Emergency Management Staging Area/Parking | 10 | 10 | Medium | \$143,493 |
| Non-designated Dispersed Parking within the USFS Day-Use Area | | | | 54 | 0 | | |
| Total Parking Spaces: | | | | 195 | 243 | Total Cost: | \$7,545,186 |

* Existing parking totals include developed and designated dispersed parking areas as outlined in the Wilson Creek Day Use Area Access and Parking Assessment produced by the USDA Forest Service Grandfather Ranger District in February 2019.

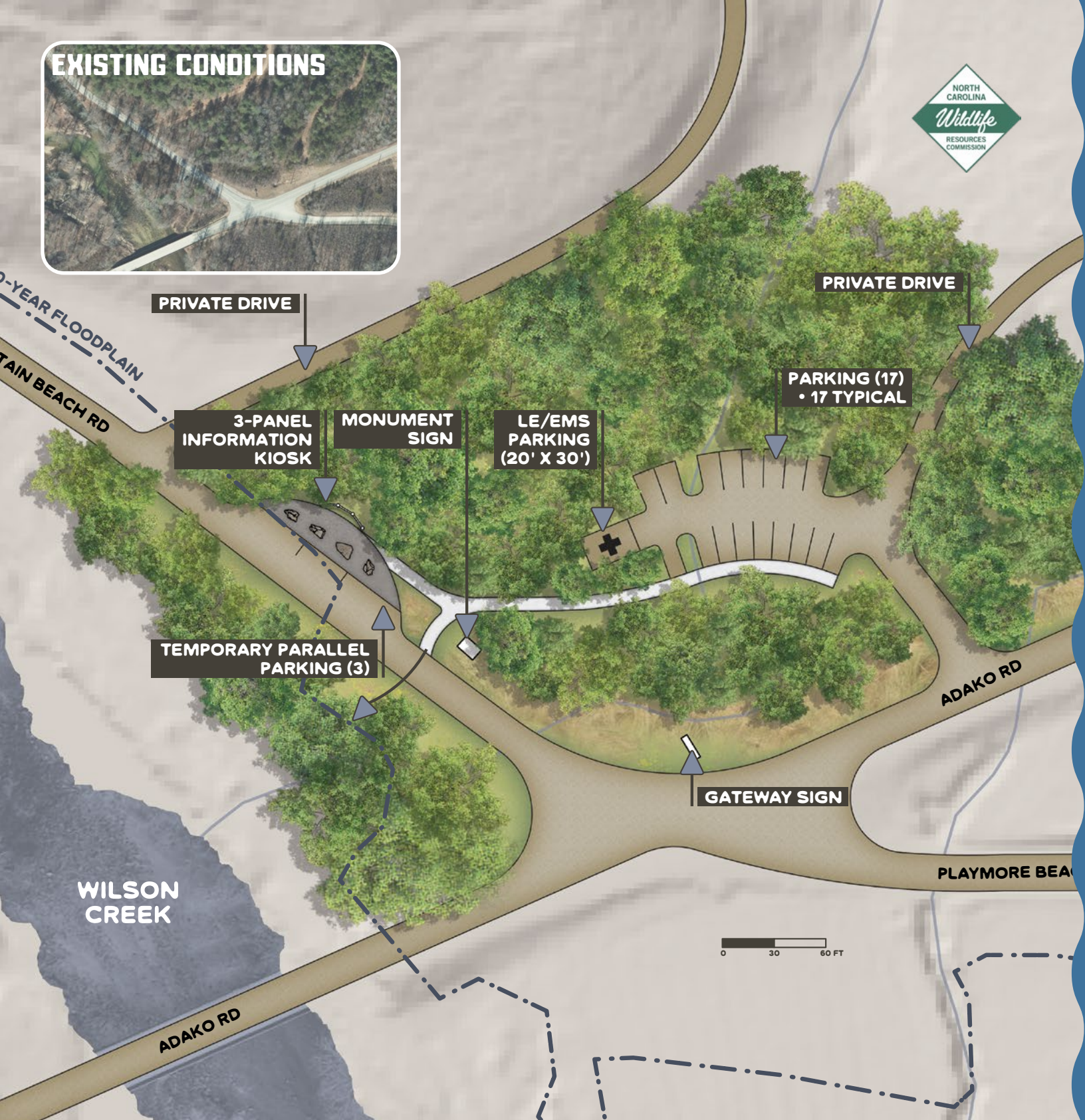
** These recommendations don't constitute a commitment from the NCWRC. All development must be consistent with conservation dedication agreements and approved by the NCWRC and NC Natural Heritage Program.

| | LAND MANAGER | SITE CLASSIFICATION | AMENITIES | PRIORITY |
|---|-----------------|---------------------------------------|--|----------|
| PLANNING SECTION 3: | | | | |
| Focus Area 13: Wilson Creek Visitor Center | Caldwell County | Developed Site | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visitor Center Building • Picnic Shelters (2) • Small Parking Areas (2) • Informational Kiosks (2) • Picnic Area • Pine Ridge Trail Access • Event Lawn Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outside Restroom • Pine Ridge Trail Trailhead Enhancement • Amphitheater • Bear-Proof Dumpster • Parking Expansion | Medium |
| PLANNING SECTION 4: | | | | |
| Focus Area 14: Emerald Pool | NCWRC ** | Angler Access | Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informational Kiosk • Parking | Low |
| Focus Area 15: Harper Creek | NCWRC ** | Trailhead | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small Parking Area • Harper Creek Trail Trailhead Sign Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1-Panel Kiosk • Angler Access • Parking Expansion | Medium |
| Focus Area 16: The Old Mill | NCWRC ** | Parking Area | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Angler Access • Bear-Proof Trash Cans (4) • Bear-Proof Dumpster Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • *Explore development of additional recreational amenities with a willing government or non-profit organization partner. | Low |
| Focus Area 17: Mortimer | NCWRC ** | Visitor Orientation Area/Parking Area | Existing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small Parking Area (3) • Angler Access • Town Of Mortimer Flagpole and Monument Proposed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gateway Sign • 3-Panel Informational Kiosk With Temporary Parking (3) • Interpretive Sign | Medium |

* Parking totals and estimates of probable cost were not determined for planning sections 3 and 4 due to their location outside the USFS day-use area.

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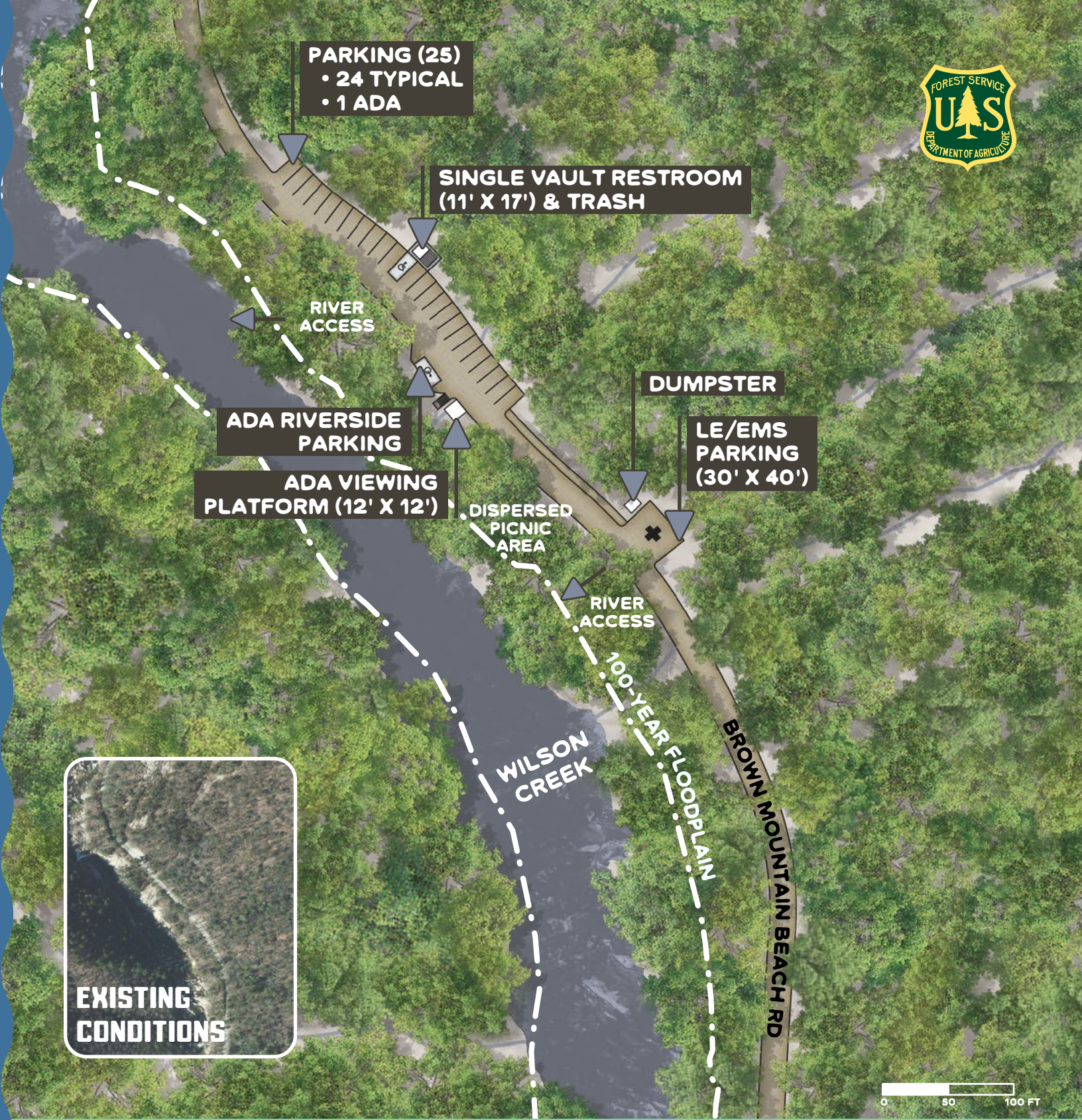
EXISTING CONDITIONS



FOCUS AREA #1: ADAKO - NC WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION

ALLOWABLE USES:

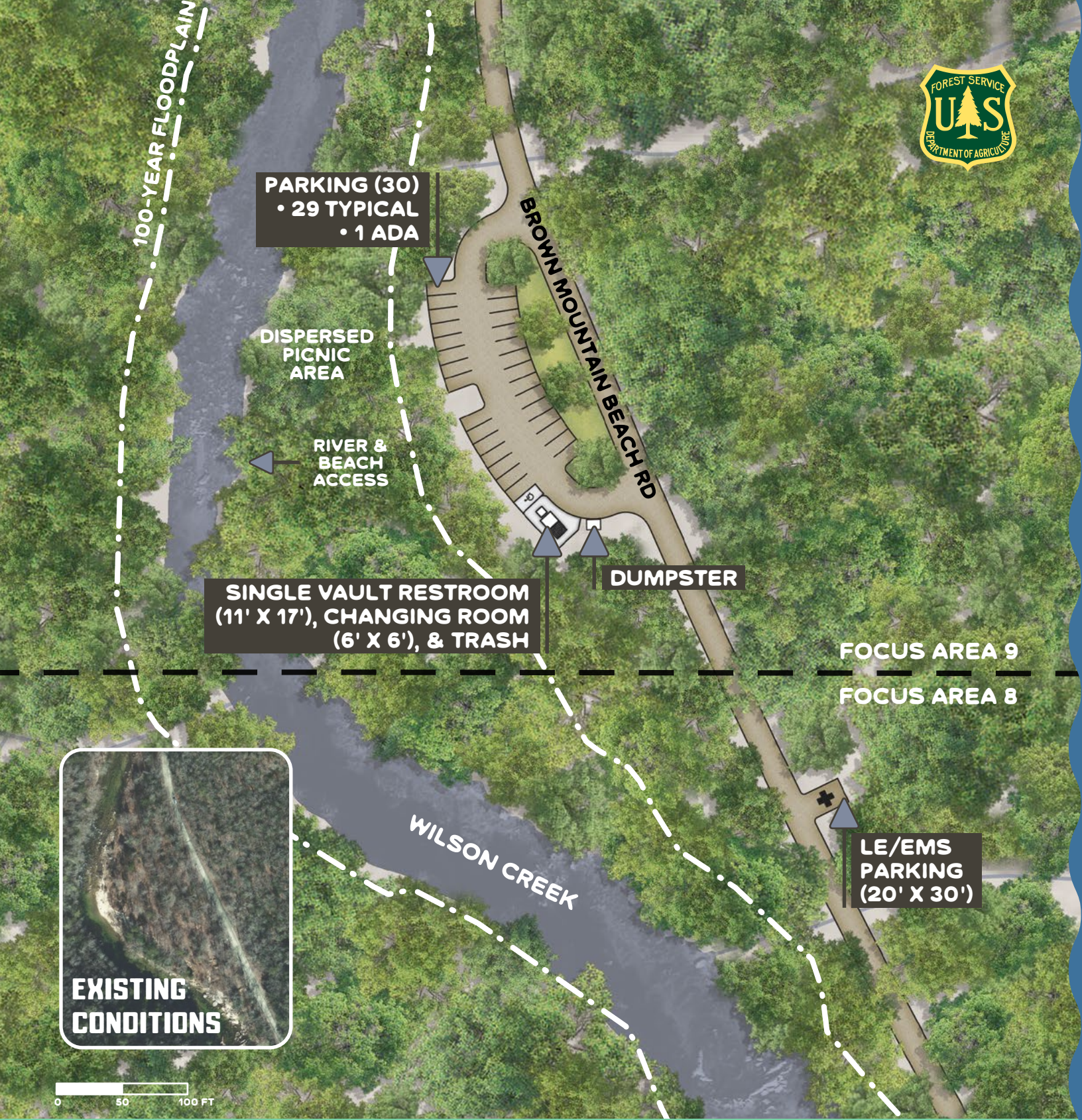




FOCUS AREA #7: LADY ON THE ROCK - US FOREST SERVICE

ALLOWABLE USES:





FOCUS AREA #9: CREEKSIDE - US FOREST SERVICE

ALLOWABLE USES:





EXISTING CONDITIONS



FOCUS AREA #10: DEERHORN - CALDWELL COUNTY

ALLOWABLE USES:



IMPLEMENTATION

The Wilson Creek Action Plan provides a vision for future outdoor recreation infrastructure development along Wilson Creek. The completion of the planning process represents an important first step that should be built on to accomplish implementation. Project partners should continue to engage stakeholder groups, government leaders and staff, affected landowners, and community members, providing regular updates on implementation progress.

TIMELINE:

