

# Winding dirt road in Roan Highlands bothers lovers of scenery

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A zigzag dirt road has been bulldozed through an unspoiled section of the scenic Roan Mountain ridge system in Mitchell County, including some property the federal government is trying to acquire as a buffer strip for hikers on the Appalachian Trail.

"It's a really ugly scar in an otherwise pristine landscape that thousands of people enjoy each year," said William deBuys, director of the Chapel Hill-based N.C. Nature Conservancy, a conservationist organization that owns land in the Roan Highlands.

DeBuys also warned of potential erosion problems and environmental damage.

The affected area has "some of the best and most spectacular mountain views in the whole eastern United States," said Ronald J. Tipton, Southeast regional director of the Wilderness Society.

"You can almost call it the jewel in the crown, right in the center of incredibly beautiful Roan Highlands complex," Tipton said last week from his office in Atlanta.

The Roan Mountain Highlands ridge traverses the North Carolina and Tennessee border. The highlands, which jut higher than 6,000 feet in places, are nationally

known for their naturally occurring rhododendron and their series of treeless balds that support colonies of rare plants.

The new road, a series of switchbacks discovered within recent weeks, meanders from N.C. 261 to within about 300 feet of Grassy Ridge Bald, a 6,200-foot peak that is about one-half mile from the Appalachian Trail, according to officials at the U.S. Forest Service's North Carolina headquarters in Asheville.

Conservationists and forestry officials said the road could be seen clearly from the trail. "It is what we have been working for so many years to try to prevent," said Carol T. Coffey, a dentist in Knoxville, Tenn., who is a member of the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy.

Since the early 1970s, Coffey's group has been helping federal and state governments to acquire mountain land so it won't be developed. Coffey said his organization was halfway to its goal of tying up about 22,000 acres.

Stanley A. Murray of Kingsport, Tenn., president of the Highlands Conservancy, said the group negotiated unsuccessfully with the owners for some of the land on which the road was built. The conservancy then backed off when the Forest Service itself began

negotiations.

"This area never had a road to it as far as we know. There is no trace of any road up there," Murray said. "It is an area that's extremely scenic. A lot of people figured it was protected by the government all these years."

The land has been owned since the 19th century by a family named Peake whose members live in various states.

Dean R. Peake, a Spruce Pine dentist, said his family built the road on its property to obtain seedlings from a strand of Fraser firs -- a popular Christmas tree.

No one questioned the Peake family's right to build the road on their property. But its presence has raised the stakes in the U.S. Forest Service efforts to acquire

54 acres of Peake land as an Appalachian Trail corridor.

George A. Olson, the superintendent of national forests for North Carolina, said he and other forest service officials unsuccessfully tried a legal tactic that would have transferred the 54 acres to federal ownership before the Peakes were paid for it.

The attempt to obtain a "declaration of taking" was blocked, Olson said last week, by higher-ups in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the forest service's parent agency.

Instead, the forest service sued the Peakes in federal court to condemn the land, a more conventional action. The Peakes have contested that move and asked for a jury trial.

Those actions keep the 54 acres in the family's hands until the case is heard. But, in the wake of the road construction, Olson said he might try again for a declaration of taking.

Olson said he was also re-evaluating whether 54 acres of Peake land was really enough protection for the trail. The family owns about 200 acres on the mountain.

"We are re-evaluating as to what we believe is minimally necessary," Olson said. "We recognize the beauty of that particular piece of Roan Mountain as related to the experiences of the people who use the trail."

"We also recognize the sensitivity of the fragile nature of the flora up there, the sensitivity of the high-elevation bald."

The Peake family, Peake said, is resisting condemnation because the government's price for the land, \$1,100 per acre, is too low.

He said developers had offered more for the Peakes' Highland holding, which had been in the family since 1856. "We never gave in to those people," he said of the developers. But he said he thought the 54 acres was worth more than \$1 million.

Peake also said hikers had burned the family's fences, pulled up rhododendrons and rare lilies, and cut off an older road the family used to reach a cattle herd.

"I know how these people feel who hike on trails. I hike too," said Peake. "(But) we want everybody to be fair with us."