

# National Parks Air Tour Management Program



**Federal Aviation  
Administration**



**National Park  
Service**

**WELCOME – WE WILL  
BEGIN SHORTLY**

**September 16, 2021**



Photo Credit: National Park Service (NPS)

# National Parks Air Tour Management Program



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Service**

**Draft Air Tour  
Management Plan for:**

**Great Smoky  
Mountains  
National Park**

**September 16, 2021**



Photo Credit: National Park Service (NPS)

# Welcome

- Thank you for joining us today.
- Today's meeting focuses on the draft Air Tour Management Plan for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.
- We invite you to share your feedback on this draft.
- Specific instructions will be provided throughout this meeting on how to submit your questions.
- This meeting is held pursuant to the National Parks Air Tour Management Act (NPATMA) and its implementing regulations.



# Presenters

- **Keith Lusk**, Program Manager, Special Programs Staff, Western-Pacific Region, FAA
- **Vicki Ward**, Overflights Program Manager, Natural Sounds and Night Skies Division, NPS
- **Cassius Cash**, Superintendent, Great Smoky Mountains National Park
- **Adam Beeco**, Social Scientist and Overflights Planner, Natural Sounds and Night Skies Division, NPS



# Asking Questions

- Throughout the meeting, we invite you to share your questions. Please submit questions using the Google form posted by the FAA in the chat area of the social media platform you are using (Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube).
- Questions will be addressed at the end of the presentations as part of the Q&A portion.



# Submitting Comments

- All written comments for the record must be submitted via the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) site or sent to the mailing addresses listed on the Great Smoky Mountains National Park PEPC site.
- These written comments become part of the official record.
- Please note that written comments must be submitted on or before October 3, 2021.



# Format of Meeting

- This meeting will be 90 minutes long.
- We will adjourn at 6:00 PM Eastern Time.
- In the event questions are addressed before this end time, we will continue to hold the meeting until this identified end time to allow for any additional questions that might come in.



# National Parks Air Tour Management Program



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**Overview of the National  
Parks Air Tour  
Management  
Act (NPATMA) and Air  
Tour Management Plans  
(ATMP)**

**September 16, 2021**



Photo Credit: National Park Service (NPS)

# NPATMA Overview

- Requires the FAA, in cooperation with the NPS, to develop an ATMP for those parks and Tribal lands where operators have applied to conduct commercial air tours
- Act applies to commercial air tours:
  - Within ½ mile of park
  - Over Tribal lands within or abutting a park
  - 5,000 feet altitude or less above ground level (AGL)



# NPATMA Overview

- Does not apply to general aviation, commercial airline, or military flights
- Does not apply to Alaska parks, Grand Canyon National Park, or Rocky Mountain National Park
- Parks with 50 or fewer reported flights per year are exempt from developing an ATMP, unless this exemption is withdrawn by NPS
- If abutting Tribal lands are or may be overflown, Tribes must be invited as cooperating agency for National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance



# NPATMA Overview

- Commercial air tour operators apply for FAA Operating Authority in order to operate over National Park System units and abutting Tribal lands
- Commercial air tour operators fall into two categories:
  - Existing commercial air tour operator
  - New entrant commercial air tour operator



# Air Tour Management Plans

The objective of any ATMP is to develop acceptable and effective measures to mitigate or prevent the significant adverse impacts, if any, resulting from commercial air tour operations upon natural and cultural resources, visitor experiences, and Tribal lands.



# Air Tour Management Plans

An ATMP:

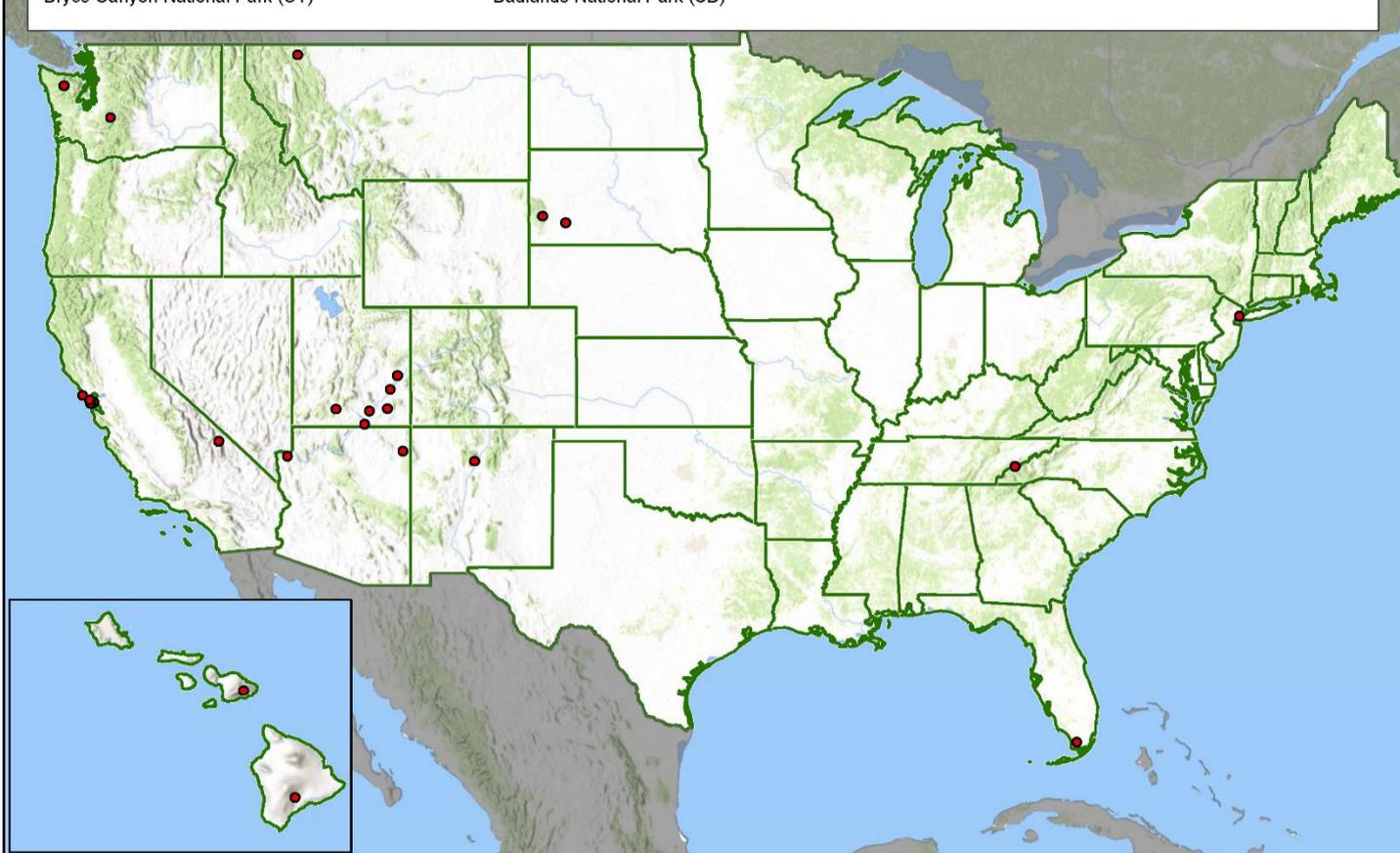
- A. May prohibit commercial air tour operations in whole or in part
- B. May establish conditions for the conduct of air tour operations including routes, altitudes, time-of-day restrictions, restrictions for particular events, maximum number of flights, etc.
- C. Shall apply to all commercial air tour operations within ½ mile outside the boundary of a national park
- D. Shall include incentives for the adoption of quiet aircraft technology
- E. Shall provide for the allocation of opportunities to conduct air tours when the ATMP limits the number of operations
- F. Shall justify and document the need for measures taken pursuant to items (A) through (E), above, and include such justifications in the record of decision



# ATMP Parks

## 24 Parks

- Mount Rainier National Park (WA)
- Olympic National Park (WA)
- Point Reyes National Seashore (CA)
- San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park (CA)
- Golden Gate National Recreation Area (CA)
- Muir Woods National Monument (CA)
- Death Valley National Park (CA/NV)
- Glacier National Park (MT)
- Bryce Canyon National Park (UT)
- Canyonlands National Park (UT)
- Rainbow Bridge National Monument (UT)
- Natural Bridges National Monument (UT)
- Glen Canyon National Recreation Area (UT)
- Arches National Park (UT)
- Canyon de Chelly National Monument (AZ)
- Lake Mead National Recreation Area (NV/AZ)
- Bandelier National Monument (NM)
- Mount Rushmore National Memorial (SD)
- Badlands National Park (SD)
- Great Smoky Mountains National Park (NC/TN)
- National Parks of New York Harbor (NY)
- Everglades National Park (FL)
- Haleakala National Park (HI)
- Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park (HI)



# ATMP Development

- For each ATMP, the agencies will:
  1. Publish proposed ATMPs in the Federal Register;
  2. Hold at least one public meeting;
  3. Comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and other legal requirements; and,
  4. Invite Tribes to participate as cooperating agencies for NEPA compliance in cases where Tribal lands are, or may be, overflown.
- The purpose of today's meeting is to review the components of the draft ATMP.



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**Draft Air Tour  
Management Plan for:**

**Great Smoky  
Mountains  
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**September 16, 2021**



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# Park Overview

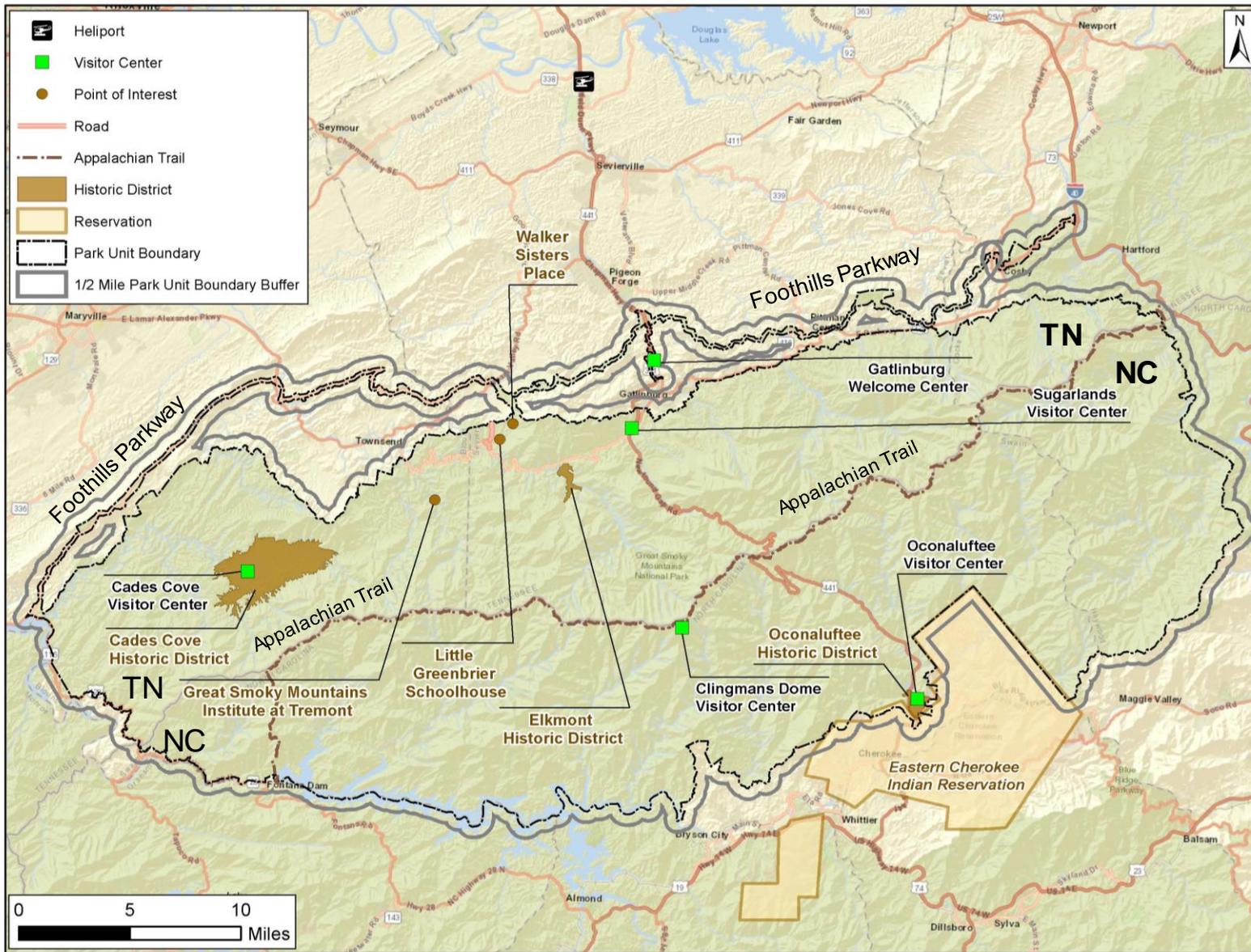
- Great Smoky Mountains National Park is located in the Southern Appalachian Mountains straddling the border between Tennessee and North Carolina.
- Most visited national park in the U.S. (>12 million annual visits).
- 522,427 acres in size, 89% recommended as proposed wilderness.



Photo Credit: NPS Photo by Jim Renfro



Photo Credit: NPS Photo by Kent Cave



# Park Resources

- Land within the Park holds spiritual and cultural significance for Tribes, including the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians whose lands border the park to the south.
- The Park's cultural resources specifically related to ATMP include:
  - Appalachian National Scenic Trail
  - Cades Cove Historic District (National Register Listed in 1977),
  - Elkmont Historic District (National Register Listed in 1994),
  - Walker Sisters Place (National Register Listed in 1976), and Little Greenbrier Schoolhouse
  - Clingmans Dome Observation Tower (National Register Listed in 2012).



Photo Credit: NPS Photo by Jim Renfro



Photo Credit: NPS Photo by Jim Renfro

# Park Resources

- The Park provides habitat for numerous federally threatened and endangered species, including:
  - Carolina northern flying squirrel (*Glaucomys sabrinus coloratus*)
  - Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis*)
  - Gray bat (*Myotis grisescens*)
  - Northern long-eared bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*)
  - And sensitive species such as bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) and peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*).
- Designations include UNESCO International Biosphere Reserve (1976) and UNESCO World Heritage Site (1983).



Photo Credit: NPS



Photo Credit: NPS

# Existing Air Tour Conditions at the Park

- Two air tour operators currently hold Interim Operating Authority (IOA) for a total of 1,920 flights each year.
- The three-year average of reporting data (2017-2019) is 946 flights conducted by two operators each year.
- Annual number of commercial air tours at the Park is limited by the IOA.
- There are no designated parameters on route, time-of-day, or altitude restrictions; no procedures to establish no-fly periods; and no training or education requirements.

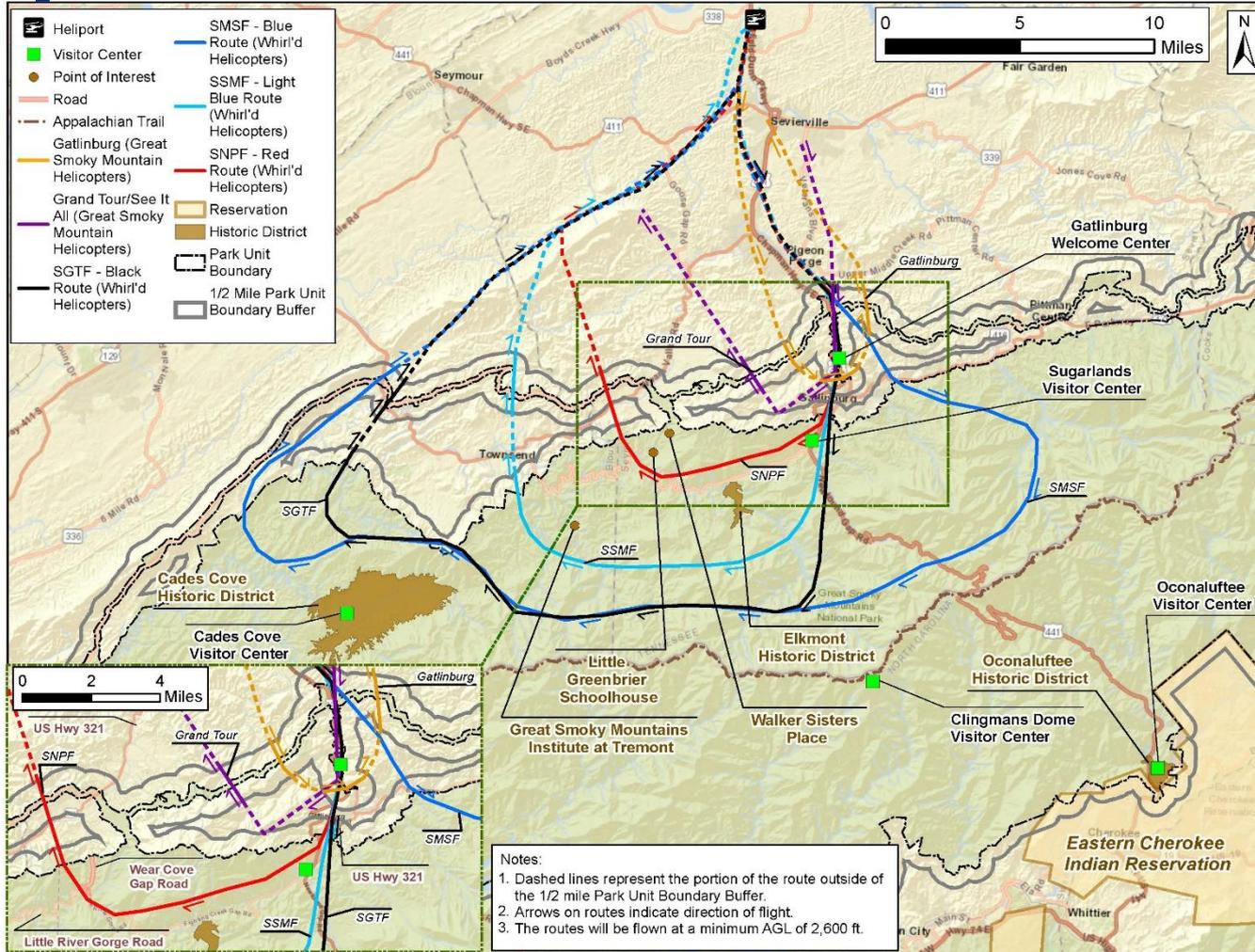


# Draft ATMP at the Park

Category	Existing Air Tour Conditions	Draft ATMP
Number of Air Tours Authorized Per Year	IOA: 1,920 3 Year Average (2017-2019): 946 flights per year	946
Altitudes	No restrictions, reported altitude currently ranging between 1,000 feet and 1,500 feet AGL	No lower than 2,600 ft. AGL
Aircraft Types	No restrictions, currently reported as helicopter	Specified for each individual operator
Time-of-Day Restrictions	No restrictions, may occur at any time	May operate two hours after sunrise until two hours before sunset
Day-of-Week Restrictions	No restrictions, may occur on any day of the week	The NPS can establish temporary no-fly periods for special events or planned Park management.
Required Reporting and Additional Requirements	Semi-annual reporting requirement; no additional requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Semi-annual reporting requirement</li> <li>▪ Operator training when made available by NPS</li> <li>▪ Option for annual meeting</li> <li>▪ Specified in-flight communications frequency</li> <li>▪ Route allocations</li> <li>▪ Daily air tour allocations</li> <li>▪ Prohibits hovering</li> </ul>



# Proposed Air Tour Routes



# Draft ATMP at the Park

- This ATMP includes restrictions on the number of air tours that the operators may conduct each day.
  - Standard day
    - Whirl'd Helicopters, Inc. may conduct up to 4 commercial air tours per day, and
    - Great Smoky Mountain Helicopter Inc. may conduct up to 1
  - Flex days – total 40 days for each operator
    - Whirl'd Helicopters, Inc. may conduct up to 5 commercial air tours per day, and
    - Great Smoky Mountain Helicopter Inc. may conduct up to 2 commercial air tours per day



# Justification for Measures Taken

- Annual and daily flight limits are intended to protect park soundscapes, visitor experience, wilderness character, and wildlife.
- Limits on larger tour routes
- The altitude restrictions in this ATMP are consistent with the National Bald Eagle Management Guidelines (2007), raptor protection guidelines, and other general concerns about wildlife, specifically avian species and migratory avian species.
- Total number of air tours proposed under this draft ATMP would be consistent with the existing air tours reported over the Park.



# Justification for Measures Taken

- The daily operation limits included in this ATMP in the form of Standard Days and Flex Days are intended to reduce the number of intrusions of non-natural sounds across the park
- Routes assigned as part of this ATMP are intended to protect visitor experience and acoustic resources of the Park by aligning flight routes with existing transportation corridors, avoiding noise-sensitive wildlife habitat, and avoiding cultural resources.
- Operator training/education and annual meeting facilitate effective implementation of the ATMP.



# National Environmental Policy Act

- The FAA and the NPS are complying with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in development of the draft ATMP.
- NEPA requires that the agencies:
  - Consider the human and natural environment that could be affected by their action (ATMP).
  - Determine the appropriate level of NEPA review.
  - Prepare associated environmental review documents.
- At this time, the FAA and the NPS have conducted an initial impact analysis and are considering developing the ATMP under an NPS Categorical Exclusion.
- The agencies will consider public comments on the ATMP, information obtained during consultations, and fully assess the environmental impacts before making a final decision on the appropriate level of environmental review.



# Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act

- The FAA and the NPS are complying with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act in development of the draft ATMP.
- Section 106 includes the requirement that the agencies:
  - Define the Undertaking and Identify Consulting Parties
  - Determine the Area of Potential Effects and Identify Historic Properties
  - Assess Effects to Historic Properties
  - Resolve Adverse Effects, if Any, to Historic Properties
- The FAA and the NPS have initiated consultation with the relevant SHPO, Tribes, and Consulting Parties.



# Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act

- The FAA and the NPS are complying with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in development of the draft ATMP.
- Section 7 includes the requirement that the agencies:
  - Ensure their actions do not jeopardize the existence of any species listed under ESA or result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat.
- Carolina northern flying squirrel (*Glaucomys sabrinus coloratus*), little brown bat (*Myotis lucifugus*), northern long-eared bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*), and tricolored bat (*Perimyotis subflavus*) are under consideration as potentially being affected by the ATMP.
- The NPS and the FAA have begun early coordination with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and anticipate conducting informal consultation with a determination of may affect, not likely to adversely affect these species.



# Public Review of the Draft ATMP

- The FAA and the NPS invite comments from the public, agencies, Tribes, and other interested parties on the draft ATMP.
- Comments must be received on or before October 3, 2021.
- Submit your comments:
  - Online: <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/GreatSmokyMountainsATMP>
  - Via Mail:  
National Park Service  
Natural Sounds & Night Skies Division  
Great Smoky Mountains ATMP  
1201 Oakridge Dr., Suite 100  
Fort Collins, CO 80525



# Next Steps

- Following the end of the public comment period, the FAA and the NPS will:
  - Review the comments and use these to inform the final ATMP.
  - Continue to coordinate and complete Tribal, Section 106, and Section 7 consultations.
  - Conclude the NEPA process by signing a decision document.
- Upon the completion of the public comment period, consultations, and NEPA process, the ATMP will be finalized. The final ATMP will be available on the FAA and the NPS websites.
- Once the final ATMP is in place, the FAA will update Operations Specifications for each air tour operator.



# Questions and Comments

- **During the meeting**, please submit questions using the Google form posted by the FAA in the chat area of the social media platform you are using (Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube).
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- **After the meeting**, please submit your comments for the record on or before October 3, 2021, at:

- Online: <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/GreatSmokyMountainsATMP>

- Via Mail:

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