



# 2021

## ANNUAL REPORT

# SOUTHWESTERN COMMISSION STAFF



## NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENTS

**RUSS HARRIS** was named as the new Southwestern Commission Executive Director. He also served on the Board of Directors for HIGHTS and the Town of Sylva Planning Board.

**JEANNE MATHEWS**, Aging Program Coordinator, received her certification as a Registered Dietician.

**BECCA SCOTT** was chosen as the Director of Community and Economic Development. Her previous position was Senior Project Manager.

**DAVID GARRETT**, Workforce Development Director, served as Chair on the Nantahala Health Foundation Board. He was also named Secretary for the North Carolina Association of Workforce Boards.



Commission employees participated in the NC Department of Transportation Spring Litter Sweep.



Staff members Linda Grindstaff and Lisa Allen, volunteered at the annual Veteran's Standdown in Franklin, NC.



The 2021 Southwestern Commission Annual Dinner was held on July 26 at Moss Valley Venue in Franklin, NC. The post-pandemic event brought many in the region together for a casual night of food and fellowship.



County Clerks in the western region of the state, along with Rebecca Badgett with UNC School of Government, attended a Fall Western Regional Conference at the Southwestern Commission in September 2021.



**LINDA LAMP**, Business Services Representative, served on the Board of the Center for Agricultural and Food Entrepreneurship, was a committee member of the Haywood Strong Flood Relief Fund, and member of the Haywood County Human Resources Association.

Office Manager and Clerk to the Board **DEBRA IVEY** served on the Board of Directors for the North Carolina Association of County Clerks (NCACC) and hosted the NCACC Fall Regional in September 2021.

**LISA ALLEN** became the Commission's new Health and Community Educator.

**SARAJANE MELTON**, AAA Director, was selected to serve on the WNC Bridge Foundation Board.

# AREA AGENCY ON AGING

## COMPANION PETS

Companion pets are lifelike robotic pets that mimic the look, feel, and movements of real cats and dogs. Over the last few years, these pets were found to support individuals and caregivers of those with dementia and people who are dealing with social isolation and loneliness. Studies show that these pets provide many positive benefits for their owners. These benefits include reduced feelings of depression and anxiety, increased feelings of purpose, and improved overall well-being. Caregivers also report reduced burden of care when their loved ones are caring for a pet.

Throughout the year, the Area Agency on Aging's Family Caregiver Support Program (FCSP) purchased over 70 animatronic pets. Many were given to families enrolled in FCSP and their loved ones with dementia. Each of the region's 3 adult day programs received 2 pets each with which their participants could interact. A few pets have also gone to individuals in the Arc of NC's program for adults with disabilities and residents of local nursing facilities. Many of the proud new owners have gone on to name their pets and



purchased accessories for them including collars, leashes, and beds. The feedback from caregivers and pet recipients has been overwhelmingly positive. During a time when people have been primarily staying at home, loneliness and isolation have increased. These pets have helped combat these negative feelings and replace them with a sense of purpose.

Most of these recipients are animal lovers but aren't able to handle the care needs of a living animal due to physical disability, cognitive impairment, restricted living situations or limited finances. Lifelong animal owners can attest that having a home without a pet leaves a void. These pets are a great solution to fill that void—no daily walks or changing litter needed!



## DIGITAL SENIORS PROJECT

Digital inclusion will now be a reality for 70 older adults in Jackson, Macon, and Swain Counties as a result of special funding through the State Library of North Carolina.

The Fontana Regional Library System and Southwestern Area Agency on Aging are partnering to bring technology (Chromebooks and Internet connectivity) to seniors in Jackson, Macon, and Swain Counties. There will be one-on-one classes provided by Fontana library staff tailored to individual needs. The Senior Centers are in the process of letting folks know about this exciting project.

Over 33% of the population in these 3 counties is over the age of 60 and many do not for many reasons know how to access resources that would improve their quality of life. We anticipate that this project will allow our older adults to gain the confidence needed to use technology, thus reducing the digital gap.

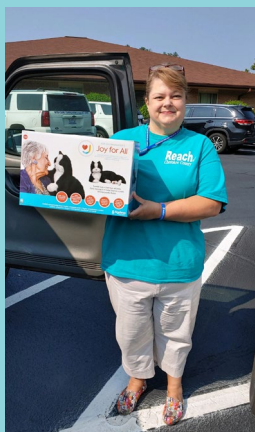
This is one way for older adults to find connections to others and gain computer skills moving forward. Older adults may sign up for this opportunity at the Senior Center in their perspective county.





## AAA SERVICES

2021 WAS THE YEAR OF DRIVE-THROUGH SERVICES TO OLDER ADULTS AND THEIR CAREGIVERS IN REGION A.



Southwestern  
Commission

## 2021 Impact

for Area Agency on Aging

85

Number of Family  
Caregivers Who  
Received Respite

985

Number of Units of Supplemental  
Supplies/Services Covered

6,500

Number of Hours of  
Respite for Family  
Caregivers

\$83,127

Total Amount of Money  
Provided to Support Family  
Caregivers in 2021

175,339

Number of Meals Distributed Through the Nutrition Program  
Across Region A

# COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

## HOUSING

The Southwestern North Carolina HOME Consortium is a group of governments coming together to receive Home Investment Partnerships Program (HOME) funds from HUD. The Southwestern Commission has been working to get this program up and running in the region, and it is set to begin in 2022! The goal of the Consortium is to bring more housing options and opportunities to our region while educating the public on the importance of housing. These are the funding priorities identified in the Consolidated Plan:



INCREASE THE  
SUPPLY OF NEW  
RENTAL HOUSING



INCREASE THE  
SUPPLY OF NEW  
HOMES FOR  
HOMEOWNERSHIP



PRESERVE AND  
REHABILITATE  
EXISTING  
HOUSING STOCK



PROVIDE  
HOMEOWNERSHIP  
AND RENT  
ASSISTANCE



PROVIDE  
HOMELESS  
HOUSING

Staff is working now to develop the application process and training modules for potential applicants. If you have any questions, contact Senior Project Manager Caroline LaFrienier at [caroline@regiona.org](mailto:caroline@regiona.org).

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

In 2021, the Commission partnered with Land of Sky Regional Council, Buncombe Partnership for Children, Children & Family Resource Center, and Southwestern Child Development Commission to tackle challenges that we are seeing across the greater Western North Carolina region in the early childhood education sector. The WNC Early Childhood Educator Workforce Project will seek to reduce the severe shortage of childcare teachers in 11 targeted counties in Southwestern North Carolina through training, coaching, education, and placement of new persons in the field. This project received over \$1 million in funding from Appalachian Regional Commission and Dogwood Health Trust for this effort, which will take place over the next several years.

## TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Commission staff are always looking for impactful ways in which we can provide technical assistance, and in 2021, we were able to provide facilitation services and land use planning services to local governments in the region. Staff also helped to organize a workshop covering American Rescue Plan Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds. Contact Becca Scott at [becca@regiona.org](mailto:becca@regiona.org) for more information

## ACCESS TO THE INTERNET

It's no secret that broadband connectivity is a challenge in western North Carolina, directly affecting the education system. But the Southwestern Commission is working with our regional partners to alleviate some of those challenges.

In the last quarter of 2021, more than \$180,000 was distributed across project sites in six counties for public internet access. The Student Connect Grant, awarded to the Commission by the State of North Carolina, funded projects that included more public WiFi hotspots, a lending library for laptops, and Chromebooks for local students.

*“The grant enabled Graham County Schools to replace many obsolete Chromebooks for students at all grade levels, so those dollars went straight into the hands of the students,” says Superintendent Angie Knight. “Having a state-of-the-art device during this crucial time of remote learning allows our students to navigate a world of virtual instruction and obtain skills that will afford them opportunities for success in their future.”*



Digital Ad from a marketing campaign for the NC Broadband Survey, done in partnership with Land of Sky Regional Commission and Dogwood Health Trust.

### A FULL LIST OF PROJECT AWARDS AND LOCATIONS

#### CLAY COUNTY **\$55,000**

to provide 55 Chromebooks to students who have trouble accessing technology and expand broadband capabilities to the Clay County Recreational Park.

#### GRAHAM COUNTY **\$29,874**

to provide Chromebooks to Graham County Schools for distribution to students.

#### HAYWOOD COUNTY **\$9,459**

to purchase additional laptops and hotspots for the student lending library.

#### JACKSON COUNTY **\$49,950**

to put free, public WiFi in downtown Sylva for use as a hotspot for students and for visitors to have online accessibility.

#### MACON COUNTY **\$19,950**

to create public community hotspots at two community centers and the Sky Valley-Scaley Mountain Volunteer Fire and Rescue facility, all in south Macon County.

#### SWAIN COUNTY **\$5,989**

to add a community hotspot at Swain County Recreational Park.



Commission Staff organize hotspots to be distributed in the region to households who need internet access for educational purposes.

## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

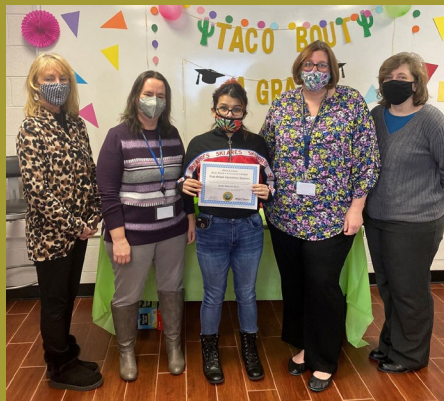
### WIOA SUCCESS

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Adult program, administered through the Southwestern Workforce Development Board, offers hope to students who may not otherwise obtain higher education or necessary certifications, while helping to fill the current workforce needs in vital fields like healthcare. Below are four stories, some written by the students themselves, that demonstrate the life-changing impact the program has on residents in Region A.



*Hi! My name is Kira.* I've dreamed about being a nurse since I was 5 years old. I was raised in a poor family. We never went without what we needed but lived paycheck to paycheck with no wiggle room for things that were considered “luxuries”. I was often bullied in school because my family couldn't afford things that other kids had. I got my CNA license by the time I turned 18 and started taking prerequisites for Nursing right after high school. After a few semesters of college, I started to second guess myself. I started to think I wasn't smart enough to be a nurse. I kept switching majors, trying to find something else that fit, but there was nothing else. I used up my financial aid and gave up on my dream. After struggling with my mental health through most of my twenties and finding out that I was pregnant after leaving an abusive relationship in 2016, I knew that the child I was bringing into this world needed me to do better. I finally started Nursing in 2018, which is the hardest thing I've ever done as a single mother.

WIOA played a huge role in my success. They paid for my second year of Nursing school, all the fees related to my NCLEX, on top of the Finish Line Grant which helped to cover my rent for a couple of months when I had to significantly cut back on hours at work to finish the last semester. I couldn't be more grateful for the tools and resources they equipped me with to get me where I needed to be. I graduated, I passed NCLEX, and I officially became an RN on my 31st birthday. Nothing is impossible if you set your mind to it and nothing worth having comes easy. I might not be rich, but I am excited about beginning the career I've always dreamed of and paving the way to a better future for my daughter. Thank you, WIOA!



On February 5, 2021, **SABLE ARAUZ** of Cherokee County earned her High School Equivalency Diploma. She

reached this goal with persistence and hard work, along with the support of the partnership of HIGHTS and Tri-County Community College. She plans to begin college in the summer to study psychology. During her time in class, Sable proved to be an example to her peers of the power of persistence and keeping your eye on your goals. Congratulations to Sable!

Surrounded by her family, **ALLYSON ELLIOTT** broke into tears the moment she was asked how it felt to be a graduate of Haywood Community Learning Center. “It was very hard,” she said. “I’m just thankful I made it. It was very hard not to have our senior year but it’s more important to graduate and have a diploma.” Allyson said she plans to enroll in the veterinary technical course at AB-Tech in Asheville.



**LESHEA CARR**, 2021 NC Governors Award of Excellence winner for Outstanding Adult, with her daughters celebrating her achievements.

While raising two daughters as a single mother in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, LeShea persevered to complete the Nursing degree program at Tri-County Community College in the spring of 2021. The Tri-County NCWorks Career Center in Murphy and Lisa Penland, the WIOA case manager from Macon Program for Progress supported LaShea, particularly through our Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Adult scholarship program to help her complete her training.

While enrolled as a full-time student, LeShea worked as a licensed phlebotomist at Union General Hospital in Blairsville, Georgia. She demonstrated leadership by serving as a student ambassador, helping and tutoring other Nursing students. Since graduating from Tri-County Community College, LaShea has advanced her healthcare career as a Registered Nurse in the emergency room department at Angel Medical Center in Franklin.



funding for  
**9 BUSINESSES**  
to have  
**12 DIFFERENT TRAININGS**  
impacting  
**94 EMPLOYEES**  
in our region

## WHAT’S UP? TRAIN UP!

Train Up is a fresh look at a solution to help employers in our region with their training needs. It is a reimbursable grant program designed to provide funds for businesses to train current workers by providing skills upgrades and process improvement.

One of the recipients of Train Up this year was Winding Stairs Farm & Nursery in Macon County. They submitted two applications and successfully received funding for both requests to train their staff of twelve.

*“Building a Sustainable Farm & Nursery Business enabled management to develop new strategies to keep the company in the mindset of growth and development,” said Amanda Chappell, Operations Manager. “This training empowered the team to feel more confident about selling plants and learn techniques on increasing sales, at a one-on-one customer service level.”*

*She goes on to share, “Masterclass on Gardening was hands-down some of the best training the team has had in a long time. The knowledge we can now impart to our customers is priceless, especially as invasive plants are a growing concern and the most frequently asked questions are about native plants.”*

Over the past year, Train Up provided funding for 9 businesses to have 12 different trainings impacting 94 employees in our region. Funding for this incumbent worker program is provided through Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funds designated to the Southwestern Workforce Development Board by the state.

# SOUTHWESTERN RURAL PLANNING ORGANIZATION (RPO)

During a brief dip in Covid-19 cases during the summer of 2021, the Southwestern Commission was able to host an in-person meeting of the North Carolina Association of Rural Planning Organizations. Transportation planners from rural areas across the state enjoyed gathering in the historic Jackson County Courthouse in Sylva.

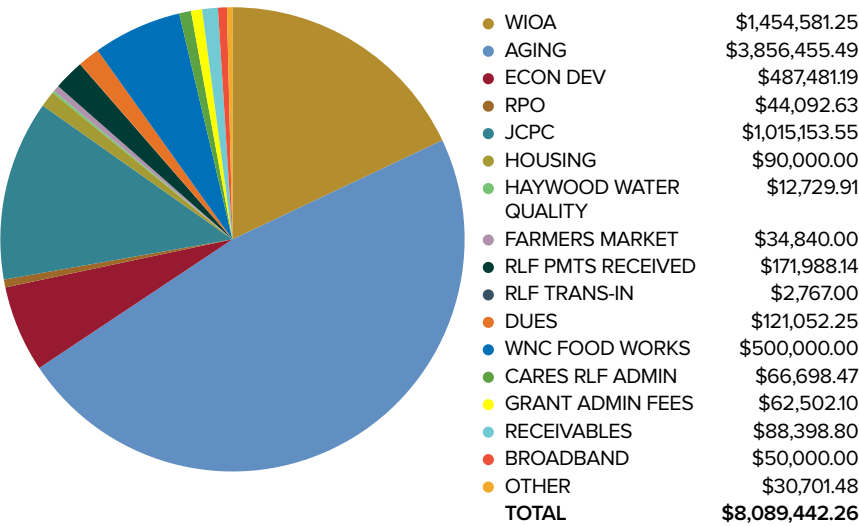


RPO staff continued to track the ongoing budget woes facing NCDOT and the frequent schedule changes. Prioritization cycle 6.0 was halted due to lack of available funding to program new projects. In better news, the controversial Corridor K project in Graham County finally reached a resolution and will begin construction in 2022! The Macon County Comprehensive Transportation Plan was adopted by the local governments and the Board of Transportation. Staff continued to collect data on projects for future funding opportunities and explore additional funding sources for electric vehicle charging infrastructure and pedestrian bridges. If you have a transportation need in your community, please let us know and we will assist you in any way we can.

# FINANCIALS

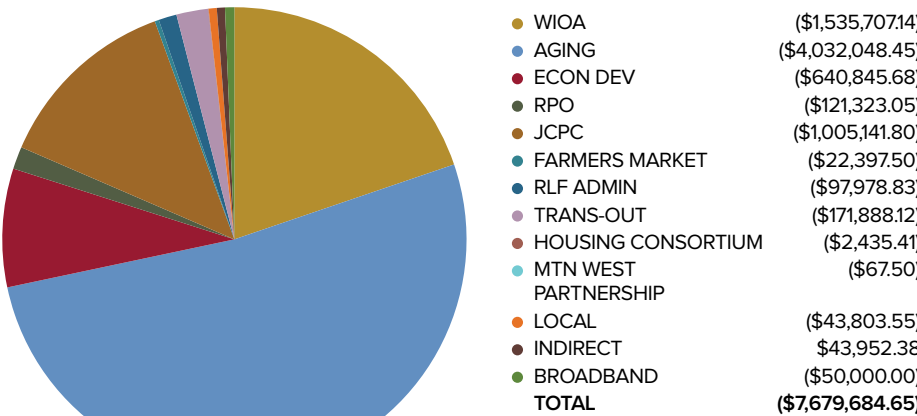
## GENERAL FUND RECEIPTS

JAN-DEC 2021



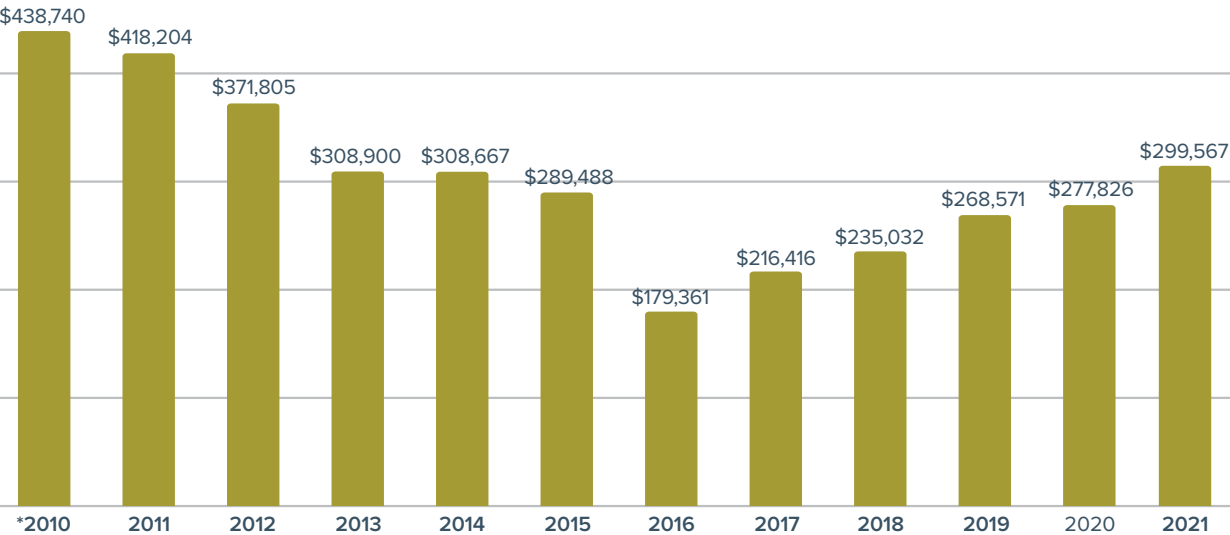
## GENERAL FUND DISBURSEMENTS

JAN-DEC 2021



## FUND BALANCE

2010*	\$438,740
2011	\$418,204
2012	\$371,805
2013	\$308,900
2014	\$308,667
2015	\$289,488
2016	\$179,361
2017	\$216,416
2018	\$235,032
2019	\$268,571
2020	\$277,826
2021	\$299,567



\*This increase was due primarily to large grants from Golden Leaf and CPF for the EDNET Projects.

## FROM THE CHAIRMAN



In July 2021, when we gathered for our Annual Dinner, we shared a hope that we were turning a corner not just on Covid but on many other challenges facing our region. Sadly, we soon realized that Covid variants and hardships would continue to dominate our lives. From flooding to rising costs, we as leaders have watched our citizens constantly deal with tragedies and tribulations. We have lost loved ones. We have suffered setbacks. We have wondered if better days are ahead.

As a fellow elected official and Chairman, I can look you in your eyes and say that better days are ahead. We have watched our communities endure and support each other. We have found ways to balance safety without sacrificing our soul and traditions. We have found ways to cooperate and work across lines of divisions. We are humbled but stronger now to resume the work in making Western North Carolina the best place in America to call home. The Southwestern Commission has and will continue to be a constant in helping us do so.

In September, Sarah Thompson left as Executive Director. For five years, Sarah took the Commission to unimaginable new heights and increased our funding for economic development, housing, and health. She did so not only by exhibiting practical leadership, but with class, dignity, and grace. As an organization, we miss her but have found an executive director who is pushing us even higher. Our Executive Board was proud to name Russ Harris as our Executive Director. Russ has already proven to be a leader who is unfazed by challenges and committed to strengthening our region through innovation and adaptability. I have no doubt that Russ is the right person for the right time to lead the Southwestern Commission, especially in the areas of broadband, economic recovery, and workforce.

As it concerns broadband, the Southwestern Commission is committed to the belief that our citizens deserve every opportunity and ability to connect to high-speed internet. In 2021, our staff worked to fill gaps with regard to student access to broadband. The Southwestern Commission distributed over 200 hot spots to students in all seven counties and provided funding in six counties to develop public Wi-Fi homework hotspots and to provide devices to students who needed them. Even as we faced rising costs and economic unknowns, the Commission has worked with our regional partners to address workforce shortages in childcare by helping with the recruitment and training of childcare workers. Together we have also strengthened the “Recovery to Work” ecosystem in the region so that people in addiction recovery can become productive and successful members of our communities. Our Area Agency on Aging provided over 175,000 meals to older adults in 2021 as our Covid response was active, flexible, and supportive.

None of our accomplishments this year would have happened without the grit and dedication of our Southwestern Commission employees. Every day these men and women work tirelessly for each of us. They believe, and they are correct, their work matters in improving the lives of our constituents no matter their age, background, or address. Time and time again in 2021, our employees met the challenges and no doubt saved lives.

This year, let us not celebrate the end of challenges but that we had the audacity to endure, to overcome, and work together. In the end, let that be the legacy of our leadership and organization as we seek the successes of tomorrow.

All my Best,  
**ZEB SMATHERS**  
CHAIRMAN

## FROM THE DIRECTOR



Benjamin Franklin is credited with saying that “When you are finished changing, you are finished.” One of the strengths of the Southwestern Commission has always been its ability to change to meet the challenges and the needs of the region, and 2021 was no exception. We continued to learn and adapt to the challenge of living in a global pandemic and the changing demographics of the region, but we enthusiastically embrace the opportunity of increased funding to address these challenges. As an organization, we underwent our own transition in 2021 when Sarah Thompson left the position of Executive Director to join Dogwood Health Trust as the Vice-President of Impact-Economic Opportunity. However, this transition has been smooth due to the professionalism and commitment of our staff and the steady leadership of our Board.

Our departments remain focused on helping our members and partners to navigate through the recovery from COVID-19, while remaining focused on our mission of “improving the quality of life in the region by assisting local governments in achieving their goals.” We continued to make progress toward the issues that we hear about in every community that we visit: broadband, housing, and workforce.

We talk a lot in our organization about the meaning of regionalism and I believe the true meaning of a regional mindset is rooted in our relationships with one another. The Southwestern Commission region has always had a spirit of what one former Board Chairman called “Neighborism”. This sense of “Neighborism” was on full display in September of this year when Tropical Storm Fred hit Haywood County, and as the rain stopped and the waters receded, we began to see an outpouring of care and assistance from every community in the region.

As we move into 2022, the Southwestern Commission is committed to making sure that our region emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic stronger than ever. We have the pieces in place both from a staffing and a programmatic standpoint to help our communities address their challenges and seize the opportunities that we have.

I am truly humbled by the opportunity to serve as your Executive Director, and honored to serve with such committed staff and the dedicated, selfless leaders that make up our board.

**RUSS HARRIS**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



## SINCE 1965

The mission of the Southwestern Commission is to improve the quality of life in its seven-county service area by assisting local governments in reaching their goals.

The Southwestern Commission is the council of government (COG) for North Carolina's Region A, covering the western most part of the state; Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Swain Counties, the Qualla Boundary, and the 17 municipalities therein.

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