



The George Washington National Forest Plan: Why is it important to get involved?

After attending the first round of public workshops for the new revised George Washington National Forest (GWNF) Plan, we now pause to ask the relevant question, "Why is it important to get involved?"

To answer this question, we first need a little history. Every National Forest is required to create a new Forest Plan every 10 to 15 years. The Plan guides forest management—everything from logging, mining and burning to protection, conservation and recreation—and says what is allowed and where it is allowed throughout the entire 1 million acres of the GWNF. The last plan was created in 1993. Since then the Forest Service in Washington has created new rules that guide planning. Those rules were deemed to be illegal in a recent court case and so they were thrown out by the judge.

In March of this year "new" new rules were proposed. They are little more than carbon copies of the old new rules. It's like this: Forest Plans are "significant actions" that have been ruled to have direct impact on the forest. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) must be created that studies what impact the plan will have on the forest, its resources—land, water, soils, wildlife, plants—and even local economies. It's the law, according to the National Environmental Policy Act. Well, the "new" new rules, just like the illegal "old" new rules, frames the plan so that relevant environmental and economic analysis is

not required. The public would have no legal ability to comment or appeal either the process or the content of the plan.

So more lawsuits have been filed. Legal arguments will follow. The forest planners desperately want to get the GWNF plan done before the court invalidates the "new" new rules. They are trying to avoid any environmental



Little River Roadless Area (Rockingham County)
George Washington National Forest

or economic analysis. They are not allowing time to look at a range of alternatives that could lead to better management of the GWNF. This information is critical to understand the consequences (and benefits) of different approaches of forest management.

Wild Virginia has some explicit recommendations for the Forest Plan which we feel will improve management on the forest. Some of the major points that Wild Virginia included in comments: (1) protecting all inventoried roadless areas in accordance with the Roadless Area Conservation Rule,

(2) following the recommendations of the VA Division of Natural Heritage by establishing 110 new Special Biological Areas to protect critical wildlife and plants, (3) protecting drinking watersheds within the GWNF with special management designations (see Drinking Water article on pg.4) and (4) a more thorough review of the *uninventoried* roadless areas and old-growth areas for the entire National Forest. For a detailed look at our comments for the Plan revision please follow our website www.wildvirginia.org.

The Forest Service held public workshops to discuss the new Forest Plan in five towns adjacent to the GWNF. The one person responsible for approving the Plan, Forest Supervisor, Maureen Hyzer, wasn't present for a single workshop. We can only hope that Ms. Hyzer is taking the planning process as seriously as we are.

There were some major shortcomings to the meeting format. For example, all discussion happened in small groups of 3-10 people and there was no effort to connect comments with names, organizations, or real people. There were no opportunities for anyone, other than head planner Ken Landgraf, to ask questions, make comments or share thoughts with everyone else who came to the workshops.

Participants were asked to look at maps of the forest to say what they "want." **Continued on pg.2**

Wild Virginia Update

Letter from our President, Eric Gilchrist

Life offers a mixed bag of experiences and emotions.

The Forest Service recently hosted four open meetings in western Virginia and one in Baker, West Virginia. These meetings are just one step in the process to revise the GWNF forest plan as described in the front page article by Ernie Reed.

With three fellow board members and my wife, I attended the meeting held in Verona, Virginia. The meeting was attended by hunters, bikers, hikers, conservationists, loggers, neighbors, teachers, scientists, ATV enthusiasts, farmers, and neighbors who felt it was important enough to give up at least five hours of their personal time. The Forest Service arranged for us to engage in brief sessions to share with others our dreams and desires for a better national forest here in Virginia.

From what I could tell, about half of the people wanted more conservation measures taken to further protect the GWNF from overuse and extractive types of activities. Basically, environmentalists and conservationists recognize the outside pressure on wild areas that provide immense ecological services to serve our national and personal needs, such as simple, clean drinking water. We understand the following:

- Areas defined as Wilderness by

acts of Congress are our best form of land protection. In Wilderness Areas we can still hike, camp, fish, and hunt. This designation does not allow mechanized machines, including chain-saws.

- The average Wilderness area in US National Forests outside Virginia is 18 percent. In the GWNF it is only 4 percent!
- Furthermore, the percentage of total land area in Virginia that is legally deemed as Wilderness is less than 1%. That means the other 99.4% of Virginia is subject to whatever humans collectively or individually decide to do.
- Wild Virginia and other conservationists have identified beautiful wild areas that are ideal for adding to the total GWNF Wilderness acreage. If the forest plan includes these areas, the total will still be less than 8%.

What I heard from the other half of the meeting participants seemed to be short-term and myopic thinking. Some examples: One man is a bird hunter who wants the Forest Service to cut more trees to create open areas for grouse to live in. He did not want to engage in conversation about the needs of the rest of the native flora and fauna. A bear hunter was adamant against designating more Wilderness areas. He

was not aware of the scientific fact that even though bears are adaptable to a variety of habitat, they prefer wilderness areas to all others. Wilderness makes for better bear hunting. Another man thought that if a bio-energy source was discovered in a Wilderness area, our society would want to use it. It's hard for me to identify with this type of short-term thinking that doesn't seem to address our current national energy crisis realistically and certainly doesn't protect our forests.

It seemed at this meeting the anti-conservationists conscripted many misguided arguments that would essentially stop environmental progress. I thought most Virginians were ready to move on to real solutions for our future generations. Apparently, there is a need for a greater chorus of Virginians to stand up for forest protection.

The opposition to serious environmental protection is feisty and strong. I'd like to remind our readers Wild Virginia is not against legal hunting and good timbering practices. We are for sound scientific policy that is good for the Forest, which ultimately is better for mankind. To boost our Wilderness areas in the GWNF from 4 to just 8 % will take the will of you, Congress, and the President. Please let's not wait any longer.

George Washington National Forest Plan (continued from page 1)

More logging. More ATV and horse trails. More deer. There was little to no effort to consider the forest itself. What is good for our forests? What level of human intervention is appropriate, where and why? What issues or ethics should guide decisions about projects and protection? Who cares about these things? Wild Virginia!

More meetings are planned for early September. You can bet Wild Virginia will be there working to get our ideas across to the forest planners. Consider joining us to tell the planners what YOU think! Stay in the loop by checking our website, www.wildvirginia.org, or by signing up for our e-mail action alerts. And you can always check the GWNF website, www.fs.fed.us/r8/gwj, to view documents and schedules. Wild Virginia cares about the planning process, project analysis, and what is happening in our forest. We will continue to fight for protection of the last remaining wild places that we love—lands that are home for Wood Turtles, Cow Knob Salamanders, Shale-Barren Rock-crests, Black Bears, and even the elusive Mountain Lion. Despite the disappointing start to the ever-important Forest Planning process, we are hopeful that if more people stand up for conservation, our voices will be heard.

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Wild Virginia Hikes and Outings

All hike info also available on our website: <http://wildvirginia.org/programsRecreation.html>

A Full Outings Calendar : COME JOIN US!

Saturday, September 6th Tour de Cut of North Mountain

As part of the Tour de Cut series presented by Virginia Forest Watch and Sierra Club, we'll hike a superb ridgetop trail surrounded by spectacular views of northern Shenandoah Valley. The trail overlooks the site of the future Laurel Run timber sale, where the Forest Service plans to cut 484 acres of the forest. In addition, a 15-mile long industrial wind turbine development is proposed on the ridge where we will hike, and other remote areas just to the south.

Bring water, lunch, snacks, and appropriate shoes for the moderate five-mile hike. **Note:** The trail is not a circuit hike so there will be a shuttle as part of this trip. Cars in the shuttle will need to go up a gravel road that is steep, with narrow turns, but suitable for passenger cars. It is a 30-minute car ride each way, which means the shuttle process will take one hour.

We will meet outside of Staunton at 9:30 a.m. in the parking lot of the Shenandoah Public Library (I-81 Exit 279), then go east toward Edinburg to the trailhead. To carpool from Charlottesville, meet at JavaJava, 2214 Ivy Road (near Sneak Reviews) at 8:00 am. Contact Jennifer at 434-989-1236 or jenn276@gmail.com if you plan to meet in C'ville to carpool. We will return around 6:00 p.m.

A neighbor has offered to let us camp overnight (optional) on his property on Saturday. It is a nice location with a large field and campfire area. Facilities are provided. RSVP to Sherman Bamford if you would like to camp: (540) 343-6359, bamford2@verizon.net.

Sunday, October 12th Trail Work Day in Ramsey's Draft Wilderness

Join Wild Virginia as we team with Potomac Appalachian Trail Club and Virginia Wilderness Committee to clean a section of Jerry's Run Trail in the beautiful Ramsey's Draft Wilderness. Adults and teenagers are all invited. Bring work gloves, water, lunch and sturdy boots. Please bring crosscut saws, loppers, axes and other hand tools if you have them (not required, other tools will be available).

To carpool from C'ville, meet at JavaJava, 2214 Ivy Road (by Sneak Reviews) at 7:30 am. You can also meet us at Mountain House Picnic Area (trailhead for Ramsey's Draft trail) on Rte 250 at 9:00 am. We do require you contact the work leader, Mark Gatewood of PATC, (540) 248-0442, before going for instructions and background info. Contact Eric Gilchrist at 434-293-8039 or ericg@ntelos.net with questions about carpooling from C'ville.

Sunday, November 2nd Doyle's Run / Jones Run Shenandoah National Park

Come celebrate the end of daylight savings time with a leisurely hike in SNP. The hike will be a 5 ½ mile circuit along Jones Run and Doyle's Run to see three of the finest waterfalls in the park! The circuit is rated "moderate" with a total elevation change of just less than 1000ft, and a few stream crossings.

We will start at Jones Run Parking Area (Milepost 84.1) at 9:30am. If you would like to carpool from C'ville, meet at Java Java, 2214 Ivy Road at 8:00am. Contact Ernie Reed at 434-971-1647 or lec@wildvirginia.org if you plan to meet in C'ville to carpool.

Forest Watch Update: Laurel Run/Road Timber Sale

In February 2007, a timber sale in the Lee Ranger District of GWNF was proposed (Shenandoah County). Approximately 486 acres in 22 cutting units were proposed for harvest using the modified shelterwood method.

Wild Virginia and Virginia Forest Watch submitted comments on the original scoping notice and an Environmental Assessment that concluded the project has no significant environmental impact. In May 2008, both organizations formally appealed the USFS decision to move forward with the project.

Water quality is one of the primary concerns about the project. Portions of Laurel Run and other nearby streams are "impaired waterways" per the VA Dept. of Environmental Quality. Acid deposition is the prime cause of the impair-

ment, and there is likely an impact over time to the soil. Yet, no discussion or analysis of water and soil quality was part of the project. Cumulative impacts to soil and water from logging near Laurel Fork, and the proximity of the recently approved Great Little Timber Sale to the north, can further harm these resources.

Much of the logging would occur in the uninventoried roadless area surrounding Falls Ridge. (Falls Ridge is identified and described in the newly published, "Virginia Mountain Treasures"). Wild Virginia believes the disturbance caused by logging and the 2.6 miles of temporary roads needed for the project could impact its future designation as a roadless area.

Other issues, including the presence of brook trout and locally rare wildlife species, were raised during an appeal resolution meeting. Suggestions for

removing cutting units from the project were made, leaving roughly 218 acres available for logging.

Forest Supervisor Maureen Hyzer issued a final decision in June 2008 to proceed with the project as originally described.

Wild Virginia will not be filing a lawsuit, which is the only avenue to halt the project at this point. We are disappointed that, unlike the Great Little Timber Sale, no changes were made to the project in response to the issues we raised. We will continue to monitor other projects on the GWNF, and raise concerns when needed. A decision on the Marshall Run Timber Sale (Beech Lick Knob area in Rockingham County) is pending, which we and several other organizations and local residents are monitoring closely. Please stay tuned.

Drinking Water Resources in the GWNF

Wild Virginia's study of the drinking water resources in the GWNF is nearing completion and a report will be available in the coming weeks. As headwaters for the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers to the north and the James River to the south, the importance of the GWNF for water quality is somewhat obvious but often overlooked. As a source of water that ultimately flows through large population centers, such as Washington DC, Richmond, and Hampton Roads, millions of people rely on these rivers for drinking water.

Our findings to date illustrate how important the GWNF is as a regional drinking water source. Five reservoirs within the GWNF are currently used as drinking water sources. Ten Virginia localities obtain some or all of their drinking water from these reservoirs. Six of these localities plus 13 others obtain some or all of their drinking water from

streams or rivers whose watersheds fall partially within the GWNF. In the geographic area immediately surrounding the GWNF, 24 localities and more than 260,000 Virginia residents obtain drinking water from the national forest.



Smith Creek Reservoir, drinking water source for Clifton Forge, VA

Geographically, these drinking watersheds comprise a large part of the GWNF. In Virginia, the GWNF occupies approximately 956,222 acres. Using a Geographical Information System (GIS), we estimate that roughly 425,874 acres are within the drinking watersheds. This represents

44.5% of GWNF land in Virginia.

Despite the large area these watersheds occupy and the important role they play as a drinking water source, they are neither identified nor designated for special management in the current Forest Plan. In fact, our research so far indicates very little difference in management activities between the drinking watersheds and the rest of the national forest. This must change. These areas merit special attention and should be managed to produce the cleanest water possible. With the Forest Plan currently under revision, now is the time to make the Forest Service aware of your concerns about the future of our drinking

water resources. Please contact them now and express your opinions about the management of our public lands. Contact information and other planning related material is available at their website, www.fs.fed.us/r8/gwj/forestplan/revision/.

Natural Community Spotlight : Shale Barrens

By Kristin Taverna & Gary Fleming, Virginia Division of Natural Heritage

Among the most specialized and unusual ecological systems on the George Washington National Forest (GWNF) are shale barrens and associated shale woodlands. Shale barrens are endemic to shale and metashale bedrock of the Central Appalachian Ridge and Valley and Blue Ridge regions from western Virginia and eastern West Virginia to west-central Maryland and south-central Pennsylvania. The southern part of GWNF (Augusta, Bath, Alleghany Counties) has the highest concentration of shale barrens in the world and is also the center of endemism for the unique flora found in these habitats.

Shale barrens are small-patch communities that generally occur on steep (~30 degree) slopes with south to west aspects at elevations from about 800 to 3000 feet. The steep, extremely dry slopes and friable nature of the exposed shale create sparsely vegetated hillsides with extensive bare bedrock and loose rock fragments that are conspicuous features of many Ridge and Valley hillsides. Shale barrens typically form where a stream abuts a shale slope, continually undercutting the thick but relatively weak rock. Less common densely grass-dominated variants occurring on steep spur ridge crests and summits are sometimes referred to as "shale ridge balds."

Shale barrens are characterized by an extremely harsh environment due to thin acid soils, high solar radiation, and a naturally eroding and unstable sub-

strate. This combination of unusual environmental conditions has resulted in a high degree of plant speciation and endemism on the shale barrens. Endemic or near-endemic shale barren species include the federally endangered shale-barren rock-cress (*Arabis serotina*), white-haired leatherflower (*Clematis albicoma*), Millboro leatherflower (*Clematis viticaulis*; also endemic to Virginia), and shale-barren wild buckwheat (*Eriogonum allenii*). These habitats also host many locally rare animals, including the butterflies Appalachian grizzled skipper (*Pyrgus wyandot*), and Olympia marble (*Euchloe olympia*).



Shale barren on west slope of Massanutten Mountains west of Woodstock Gap, Lee Ranger District. Shale-barren wild buckwheat (*Eriogonum allenii*) is flowering in foreground. Photo by Gary Fleming

The vegetation of shale barrens in GWNF varies from entirely herbaceous to sparse scrub or woodland. Tree species, when present, are typically gnarled and stunted and commonly include chestnut oak (*Quercus prinus*), Virginia pine (*Pinus virginiana*) and pignut hickory (*Carya glabra*). Stands typically have patchy herb cover in a matrix of exposed-shale fragments and soil.

Because shale barren slopes are steep and unstable, activities such as logging, road and trail construction,



Appalachian grizzled skipper (*Pyrgus wyandot*)
Photo by Steve Roble

and increased visitation are threats to the rare plants and the shale barren vegetation. The Virginia Natural Heritage Program has identified roughly 800 individual barrens on the GWNF. Many of the known examples of shale barren communities in GWNF are protected as Special Biological Areas.

For those interested in visiting these unique habitats, easily accessible sites include South Sister Knob in Bath County, and the Headwaters Barren at the intersection of US 250 and Rt. 616 in Highland County. Both are in the Warm Springs Ranger District. Please contact us if you would like more information on how to access the sites.

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Wild Virginia Launches New Website & Logo



Wild Virginia has come a long way since its formation in 1996. The web was still in its infancy back then and a website was something few people really understood. We recently worked with local web designers Mary Michaud and Mark Edwards at Optipop, based in Charlottesville, to redesign our site and logo. The new site (with the same address: www.wildvirginia.org) is easier to navigate, better organized, and, we feel, more appealing. It also allows you to join our action alert list automatically, make online donations, including automatic recurring monthly donations, and search our documents. As we post more than ten years' worth of comments, appeals, and other work it will

grow as a resource for people seeking to understand and care for the George Washington National Forest.

One of the best things you can do to help Wild Virginia is recommend us to your friends. Word-of-mouth is a very powerful tool to help Wild Virginia and all non-profits you like. Spread the word and keep visiting us online!

We welcome links from other sites, your Facebook or MySpace page, or your personal blog. We also welcome your feedback. Please let us know what you think of our new website! 434-971-1553.



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