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For Immediate Release

Wild Virginia Challenges Road Building Project in the George Washington National Forest

If the United States Forest Service has its way, it will be rebuilding a road that has been abandoned for over 9 years, threatening a rare high elevation wetland and special geologic area.

In response, Wild Virginia has filed an administrative appeal with the George Washington National Forest, asking that the Forest Service reverse a decision to reconstruct and construct a total of 6 miles of road on the crest of Peter's Mountain, in Allegheny County, 10 miles southwest of Covington, VA.

18 years ago, private landowners denied the Forest Service access across their land to the north part of the road. Other landowners followed suit on the south side in 2004. Because of this, the area has continued to be open to foot traffic, hiking and hunting, but vehicular access has been denied for over 9 years. In that time, the area has regained much of its wild character.

The area is located within the Peters Mountain North Conservation Site according to The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation's Division of Natural Heritage (DCR). Conservation sites warrant further review for possible conservation action because of the natural heritage resources and habitat they support. Natural heritage resources are defined as the habitat of rare, threatened, or endangered plant and animal species, unique or exemplary natural communities, and significant geologic formations. For this reason, DCR has proposed this area be designated a Special Biological Area.

Besides providing habitat for the endangered Indiana bat, cerulean warbler, shale barren rockcress and northeastern bulrush, the project area includes Thomas Spring, a rare high elevation seep and wetland that forms the headwaters of Cast Steel Creek, one of the most pristine creeks in the entire forest containing the endangered James spineymussel. The surrounding forest includes up to 5000 acres significant remnants of rare old growth forest and a significant population of live American chestnut.

Rebuilding the road would sever the headwaters from the rest of the creek and increase silt and runoff through construction and subsequent usage. It would also open up vehicular access to Jingling Rocks, a unique shale barrens which has suffered a history of destructive and illegal motorized off-road activity. It would also provide access for possible future logging of old-growth forest.

The Forest Service itself has proposed in its Draft Management Plan that much of this area be designated as a Key Natural Heritage Community Area. However, this project fails to consider any alternative that would give the area that level of protection.

The Forest Service is also under an agency directive to implement road closures for areas of special conservation value or roads that are considered unnecessary in order to reduce road maintenance costs forest wide. However, this project is estimated to cost more than \$140,000 with many thousands of dollars required for yearly maintenance costs.

Wild Virginia has been joined in its appeal by Virginia Forest Watch, Heartwood and two other concerned citizens. In the event that their appeal is denied, it may become necessary to take legal action for this area to be protected.

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