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Southern Environmental Law Center ~ The Wilderness Society  
Virginia Forest Watch ~ Virginia Wilderness Committee  
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## **Conservationists call for ecological restoration on the George Washington National Forest**

A broad coalition of conservation and forest-protection groups called on the U.S. Forest Service today to focus on protecting clean water, diverse wildlife habitat, old-growth forests and remote, wild areas, as well as prime recreation spots, in updating the long-range management plan for the 1.1 million-acre George Washington National Forest in western Virginia.

The agency officially launched the beginning of its plan revision process with the publication of a Notice of Initiation in the Federal Register this week. The notice includes a schedule for the first round of public meetings in early March (see below). The plan for the George Washington (GW) – the largest national forest in the East – was last revised in 1993; Federal law requires the agency to update the plan at least every 15 years. The revision is scheduled to be finalized in the summer of 2008.

Established in 1913, the GW has been a haven for generations of outdoor enthusiasts, from hunters and hikers to birdwatchers and mountain bikers. In the 70s and 80s, the forest was subjected to extensive commercial logging, including clearcuts that devastated habitats, ruined watersheds and destroyed scenic vistas. The 90s saw a drop in timber harvesting, although the agency has averaged 15.76 million board feet a year over the last five years. The agency's preliminary draft revision identifies a potential timber target of as much as 21 million board feet a year.

“The numbers only tell part of the story,” says Sherman Bamford with the Virginia Forest Watch. “What matters in large part is *where* the logging is happening, and lately a lot has been happening in environmentally sensitive areas or in places that people care about.”

“It's well known and well reported that the Forest Service loses money on its timber program,” said Sarah Francisco with the Southern Environmental Law Center. “We are urging the agency to make a clear shift away from logging to focus on uses that Virginians value most, things like recreation, clean water and scenic vistas.”

“The times have changed since 1993” noted Sierra Club representative Dave Muhly. “The American people have made clear their desire to protect our wild forest areas from logging and roadbuilding, and it's now time for the Forest Service to respond to this mandate with a new vision.”

“The Forest Plan revision offers a rare opportunity for meaningful ecological restoration,” says David Hannah of Wild Virginia. “Occurring as it does in a very fragmented and changing landscape, the GW is one of the few places in the eastern United States where large areas of mature forest, and populations of native species they are home to, can be restored.”

Other problems the conservation groups say the updated plan should address include the continued cutting of existing old-growth trees, some over 150 years old, an ongoing roadbuilding program despite the fact that the GW is criss-crossed by over 2,606 miles of various types of roads, a dramatic rise in illegal off-highway vehicle use, and poor management practices that have created ideal conditions for invasive species.

The conservation coalition will be releasing a detailed “citizens vision” for the GW in time for the March meetings. Among other things, the groups will call on the Forest Service to:

- Make ecological restoration and sound ethical management of the forest a budgetary priority;
- Manage the GW to be consistent with current and anticipated public values, including water quality, recreation, scenic beauty and wilderness;
- Protect existing mature and old-growth forests from logging and other harm; connect and enlarge mature forest patches wherever possible through road decommissioning and other restoration efforts;
- Cut back on prescribed burns, and allow lightning fires to burn in a contained manner;
- Locate managed wildlife habitats near existing early-successional land uses, such as adjacent private lands, and within previously cut areas to lessen the impacts of forest fragmentation within the public land base;
- Identify all lightly roaded or mostly intact mature forest areas, old growth, uncommon forest types, special ecological areas and conditions, rare species locations, and intact watersheds, drinking water sources, and trail sites, and strictly protect them all from logging, road construction, drilling, mining, grazing, and other development;
- Ensure that sources of clean water be strictly protected.

The Forest Service has released a Draft Comprehensive Evaluation Report providing an overview of forest resources and management. Following the March meetings, the Forest Supervisor will determine which issues will be carried forward for further analysis in the revision process. Additional public meetings will be held through the summer. In November, the Forest Service expects to release a Proposed Forest Plan for public review and comment for 90 days. Around July 2008, the Forest Service will release changes to the proposed plan and provide 30 days for public comment, after which the Forest Supervisor will approve the final plan.

| <b>Day/Date/Time</b>           | <b>Location</b>   | <b>District Ranger</b>          |
|--------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Monday March 5<br>6-9 p.m.     | Hot Springs Presbyterian Church<br>7433 Sam Snead Hwy. Hot Springs              | Pat Sheridan<br>(540) 839-2521  |
| Tuesday March 6<br>6-9 p.m.    | Rockbridge High School<br>143 Greenhouse Road, Lexington                        | Annie Downing<br>(540) 291-2188 |
| Wednesday March 7<br>7-10 p.m. | National Guard Armory<br>451 Hoover Road, Woodstock                             | Jim Smalls<br>(540) 984-4101    |
| Thursday March 8<br>6-9 p.m.   | Alleghany County Governmental Complex<br>9212 Winterberry Ave., Covington       | Gerry Jackson<br>(540) 962-2214 |
| Saturday March 10<br>1-4 p.m.  | Rockingham County Government Office Building<br>20 E. Gay Street, Harrisonburg, | Elwood Burge<br>(540) 432-0187  |

