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Forest agency to re-start planning for the George Washington National Forest

Conservationists urge priority for clean water, healthy forests

As the U.S. Forest Service re-starts its process to update the long-range plan for the 1.1 million acre George Washington National Forest in western Virginia, a broad coalition of citizen groups called on the agency to focus on protecting clean water, diverse wildlife habitat, old-growth forests and remote, wild areas, as well as prime spots for fishing, hunting and other outdoors recreation.

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 agency began its plan revision in February 2007, using new nationwide rules for forest planning and management, but suspended the process for a year after a federal court held that the rules violated environmental laws and threw them out. Now, virtually identical rules have been adopted; although they are being challenged elsewhere, the GW planners are proceeding and have scheduled a round of public meetings beginning next week (see below).

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 1970s and 1980s, the forest was subjected to extensive commercial logging, including clearcuts that devastated habitats, ruined watersheds and destroyed scenic vistas. The 1990s saw a drop in timber harvesting, although from 1993 to 2006, the average volume sold was about 17.1 million board feet annually. 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 and 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, 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,” said 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 1,872 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 has released a detailed “citizens vision” for the GW. Among other things, the groups will call on the Forest Service to:

- Manage the GW to be consistent with current and anticipated public values, including water quality, recreation, scenic beauty, wildlife habitat and wilderness;
- Make ecological restoration and sound management of the forest a budgetary priority;
- Ensure that sources of clean water be strictly protected;
- Protect existing mature and old-growth forests from logging and other harm; connect and enlarge mature forest patches wherever possible;
- 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 mostly intact mature forest areas, old growth, uncommon forest types, special ecological areas, rare species locations, intact watersheds, drinking water sources, and trail sites, and strictly protect them all from logging, road construction, drilling and other development.

The revision process will unfold over the next year or year and a half. The Forest Service has released a Draft Comprehensive Evaluation Report providing an overview of forest resources and management. Following the July meetings, the Forest Supervisor will determine which aspects of GW management need to change and which issues will be carried forward for further analysis in the revision process.

Comments on the draft report are due August 8.

Additional public meetings will be held through the summer and fall. According to the Forest Service’s latest schedule, in early spring 2009 the agency expects to release a draft forest plan for public review and comment. Around summer or early fall 2009, the Forest Service will release changes to the proposed plan and provide 30 days for public objection, after which the Forest Supervisor will approve the final plan.

All the meetings will be held from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.:

- July 14: Peter Muhlenberg Middle School in Woodstock
- July 15: Rockbridge County High School in Lexington
- July 16: East Hardy Middle School in Baker, West Virginia
- July 18: Augusta County Government Center in Verona
- July 28: Hot Springs Presbyterian Church in Hot Springs