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**Court Rulings on Forest Service Policy Bolster Drinking Water Initiatives  
in the Shenandoah Valley and Blue Ridge**

SHENANDOAH VALLEY, VA-- Local communities in the Shenandoah Valley and beyond are urging the US Forest Service to take a closer look at the drinking water that comes off of the George Washington National Forest (GWNF).

Over a quarter of a million people in western Virginia obtain some or all of their drinking water from surface waters of the GWNF. Fifteen localities—counties, cities, and towns – and many other organizations, 36 in all, have adopted resolutions asking for stronger management and monitoring of public water sources in the Forest Plan, which is in the midst of a 15-year revision.

Two recent federal court decisions should make it easier for the George Washington National Forest planners to satisfy the demands of local governments and organizations.

On June 30, the U.S. District Court in northern California overturned the Bush administration forest planning regulations, which had eliminated the use of mandatory “standards” in favor of discretionary “guidelines,” complicating efforts to protect local drinking water supplies.

In another recent twist, a federal judge, also in the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit, found Bush’s repeal of the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule unlawful. Over one-fourth of the GWNF land that supplies local drinking water to communities in western Virginia occurs in designated roadless areas and, under the 2001 rule, would be protected from road-building, logging, and other activities that impact water quality.

“Forest Planning tends to be a controversial process,” says Kate Wofford of the Shenandoah Valley Network. “There are always hot button issues like road closures, timber harvesting, and wilderness designation. But the public is not divided on this subject. There is no excuse for not having strong protection for the local drinking water sources on the George Washington National Forest.”

"The City of Staunton depends on the Staunton Reservoir in the George Washington National Forest for our local water supply, and we are hopeful that the revised Forest Plan will include consideration of drinking water," says Carolyn Dull, City Council member in Staunton, which recently adopted a resolution regarding public water supply on the Forest.

The existing George Washington National Forest Plan, finalized in 1993, affords minimal protection for public water supplies. According to David Hannah, Conservation Director of Wild Virginia based in Charlottesville, “The current plan is inadequate. More than 44% of the George Washington’s land in Virginia occurs within local drinking watersheds. Yet these lands are not identified in the current plan, and it is not clear if they are going to be managed any differently than the rest of the forest in the new Forest Plan. That will not satisfy the communities that are asking for stronger water quality protection.”

The Weeks Act of 1911 created national forests in the east, in part, to protect water supply for local communities. Tom Tidwell, new Chief of the Forest Service, has stated that watershed protection will become a top priority for the agency. “There are innumerable instances of the Forest Service stating the need to protect and manage watersheds for the public good” says Hannah. “The new Forest Plan for the George Washington National Forest is a great opportunity for the Forest Service to live up to its words.”

Many area streams and rivers are fed in part by the lands of the GWNF, and are very important to local residents. "The South Fork of the Shenandoah River is an important resource for locals in Page County and an important draw for tourists this time of year," says Chris Anderson of the Page County Department of Environmental Services. "The River is listed as impaired by DEQ, and we have a number of programs in place to improve local water quality."

“There are examples across the country where poorly-planned roads and timber harvests on public lands have blown out streams and cost local governments huge sums of money to upgrade water treatment facilities,” says Kate Wofford. “Good planning now can help prevent that from happening here.”

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For background information and links to resolutions, visit:

Wild Virginia’s website – [www.wildvirginia.org](http://www.wildvirginia.org)

Shenandoah Valley Network’s website – [www.shenandoahvalleynetwork.org](http://www.shenandoahvalleynetwork.org)

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