Official Position of the West Virginia Wildlife Federation

Supporting the need for additional active forest and wildlife management on the Monongahela National Forest

January, 2009

Introduction

The West Virginia Wildlife Federation opposes Congressional legislation that would add more Wilderness Areas to National Forests in the state. The Federation supports the existing Wilderness Areas and believes that a portion of public lands should be set aside for Wilderness Areas; however, we recognize the limitations that additional wilderness designation impose for wildlife management and the consequences of wilderness legislation on lands set aside for the use of our citizens.

There are no Definitive Wilderness Areas in the East

Wilderness legislation is popular in the western states where it has protected lands and streams that have not been exploited by man in their original state. Western streams are particular sensitive to erosion. In the east where the original forest has been harvested years ago there are no definitive wilderness areas. Many headwater streams are too acidic in the East to support fisheries and must be treated with limestone; an operation prohibited in Wilderness Areas or restricted to high cost aerial operations. The coniferous forest of the west can be maintained for generations to come as Wilderness Areas, not so the hardwood forest of the east that must be managed due to past exploitation and threats from disease and insect.

The Appalachian Hardwood Forest is a unique Forest

The Appalachian temperate hardwood forest is a unique forest in the world today providing an abundance of biodiversity in its plant and wildlife communities. The Monongahela National Forest (MNF) is the crown jewel in the Appalachian hardwood forest - a resource that we must protect for our future generations. But it is important to realize that the forest of today is not the forest of colonial days nor can it ever be again. The original Appalachian forest was dominated by virgin spruce on its mountaintops and white pine and northern hardwood forest below the conifers. While the coniferous forest was largely devoid of good wildlife populations, the northern hardwoods and the oak-chestnut forest provided the habitat which supported the abundant wildlife populations which made West Virginia the sacred hunting grounds.

The original forest was logged near the turn of the 20th century, but it is not the logger, which has kept us from restoring the original forest. Forest insects and diseases, such as the chestnut blight which decimated our magnificent stands of chestnut and the gypsy moth which is reducing the abundance of oak, our best remaining mast producer in the forest, were introduced from foreign countries. These threats and more cannot be managed in a wilderness setting; indeed they need intensive forest and wildlife management.

Early Succesional Habitat (ESH) is rapidly Declining

MNF presently has only about 3% of its forest coverage in this early stage known as Early Successional Habitat (ESH) forest in the 0-19 year old age class and only 7% of the forest is less than 40 years old. ESH is a rare habitat type and age class on the MNF and in the Eastern United States, generally. It is important to note that there is a suite of wildlife species numbering about sixty, which includes forty-three species of neo-tropical songbirds that rely on the youngest stages of forest regeneration for at least a part of their life history. Wildlife species, which depend on ESH such as the white-tailed deer and ruffed grouse, are much less abundant on the MNF than they were 10 or 15 years ago. Even species such as the wild turkey that rely on older age forest for mast production must have ESH for nesting cover. If we are to preserve the wildlife diversity on the MNF we must greatly increase the ESH on the forest. To do this we must manage the timber. (See Appendix A, B, and C for supporting information.

Mast Production is Declining

The eastern hardwood forest is much more productive and supports more diversity and greater numbers of wildlife than the western coniferous forest. This is because of the mast (acorns, nuts, berries and seeds) production of a well-managed forest. A well-managed forest has more food. Also, depending upon which species, trees lose their ability to produce mast at various ages as the trees become over-mature or become overstocked (too many trees per acre). This is a problem in much of our national forest lands in the east today. See Appendix E for more information.

In addition, many of our hardwood forest trees (including the best mast producers such as oaks and cherries) need sunlight to regenerate the new forest. This means the crop trees must be cut to allow enough sunlight to the forest floor to grow the new seedlings. The role of early-native Americans in burning for hunting according to many researchers has been greatly under estimated. This burning created and maintained many of the glades and balds reported by early explorers and undoubtedly was a major reason for the presence of many mast producing species in the forest of colonial times. We cannot over emphasize the fact that wilderness will preclude the regeneration of our best mast producing trees in the MNF. Good mast producing trees, such as hickory, oak, and black cherry are shade intolerant species; they need light to both grow and to regenerate as new seedlings when the mature trees drop out of the forest stand. These species cannot be regenerated without good forest management. If we are to maintain these important mast-producing trees on our best public lands they must be managed, and not allowed to degenerate to poorly productive forests devoid of the abundant wildlife we have come to expect.

Wilderness will also preclude the planting of promising blight resistant American chestnuts in the future as well as other forest and wildlife management practices that will benefit the people of West Virginia. The decision rests with our lawmakers. Will we allow scientific forest and wildlife management to perpetuate our National Forests or will they become sterile deserts for wildlife habitat?

The Need for Wildlife Management on our National Forests

In West Virginia most of the wildlife management on the three national forests is accomplished by the states Division of Natural Resources personnel through a cooperative agreement with the National Forest. These wildlife management practices are paid for by the states hunters and fishermen through funds derived from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses and dedicated funds from the sale of guns and ammunition. As such the hunters and fishermen of West Virginia have a vested interest in these wildlife management practices. Wilderness Areas preclude the continuation of wildlife management on the national forest; therefore, not only does habitat quality and wildlife populations suffer, but also monies spent on management practices are wasted because management cannot continue on these areas.

Poor Timber Management on our National Forests

Approximately two-thirds of the Monongahela N.F. is not available to active forest management, due to designations such as wilderness, backcountry recreation, endangered species, and other non-management prescriptions. This forest management ban means the MNF cannot meet its primary objective set up by Congress in the 1897 Organic Act to furnish a continued supply of timber to the nation. Furthermore, the lack of management on the majority of the Forest insures that critical wildlife habitat (ESH and mast production) will continue to decline.

The reduction of wildlife habitat management activity on the MNF is reflected in the Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) of timber, the goal per the Forest Plan, versus the actual timber harvest. The MNF has not harvested the ASQ of timber each year and that has further exacerbated the scarcity of ESH on the Forest. Both the ASQ and the creation of ESH have been in steep decline since 1996 (See Appendix D for supporting information).

Environmental activists with the goal to make the entire National Forest a Wilderness Area have stopped planned timber harvests. Due to frivolous lawsuits from misinformed wilderness groups, our aging forests have gone for decades with very little active management making them more susceptible to invasive insects, invasive plants, and disease outbreaks as well as many natural disasters.

Declining Wildlife Populations

Wildlife populations are declining on our National Forests in West Virginia. Good wildlife populations require food, water and cover. The decline in ESH and mast abundance has been a direct result of poor forest and wildlife management on the MNF. Poor food and cover have resulted in documented declines in game harvests on the MNF over the last several years (see National Forest game harvest reports). The decline in habitat diversity has also resulted in a big decline in wildlife diversity on the forest; wildlife species such as ruffed grouse, blue-winged warbler, golden-winged warbler, chestnut sided warbler, and a host of other species, which require ESH, have exhibited marked declines (see breeding bird survey reports).

Advocates of wilderness have attempted to appeal to hunters claiming a **Wilderness, A Great Place to Hunt.** For several years they have financed newspaper ads with pictures showing hunters utilizing wilderness for their sport. Science, provided by our wildlife professionals, shows completely different findings. Studies show that Wilderness areas have rapidly decreasing populations of game animals due to the fact active wildlife management is rare to non-existent. Traditional game species such as white-tailed deer and wild turkey have declined due to poorer habitat conditions on the Forest.

More Wilderness means less People have Access to our National Forests

Our National Forests are public lands designated for the use of all the public, but current trends are putting our National Forests off limits to the traditional user (the hunters and fishermen) and making them the exclusive property of a small group of elitist hikers that prefer the solitude of roadless areas. To the hunters and fishermen this might as well say no trespassing, because without access the hunter cannot harvest a large animal such as a white-tailed deer. Nor can a fisherman conveniently access a trout stream, if there were any trout. West Virginia has an aging population of citizens and more and more wilderness areas are being established. These areas cannot be accessed by the older-aged citizens, but are being catered to a small group of mainly non-resident wilderness advocates. The sad part of this is that by the time the hunting season comes in the majority of the hiking season is over; therefore, the hiker doesn't need to have a Wilderness Area to have the solitude and wilderness experience that they desire.

Native Brook Trout Streams Need Management

The vast majority of our native brook trout populations in West Virginia are in the National Forests and most of them have greatly reduced trout abundance. A decline in trout abundance is an early warning that the health of the aquatic ecosystem is at risk. In West Virginia, many trout streams have been impacted by acid mine drainage and acid rain, and these steams do not have the buffering capacity to maintain a healthy aquatic ecosystem. Liming and other practices can neutralize the acid deposition and restore these native brook trout fisheries. Past land use practices and natural disasters mean that many trout streams need management to return the stream to a productive trout fishery. Wilderness status means that none of these streams can be restored using conventional practices. Wilderness advocates contend that streams can be limed using helicopters, but this is not a cost effective method.

How Much Wilderness is Enough

In 1986, during the first planning phase of the MNF, a small portion of the forest (78 thousand acres) was designated as Wilderness by Congress and another 124,500 acres were designated as Backcountry Recreation, which allows administrative access only. Currently, two-thirds of the MNF is not available to forest or wildlife management. Now the wilderness advocates are pushing hard for an additional 143 thousand acres

as Wilderness Areas, all with no access, no wildlife management, no timber management, and no you. It is no secret that wilderness advocates are pushing for a Potomac Highlands National Park. Can you see the no hunting signs yet?

What can You do?

Write your Congressman, particularly Congressman Rahall! Tell them we don't need more Wilderness Areas in West Virginia. Sign up for West Virginia Wildlife Federations' Action Alerts (www.wvwf.org) or the West Virginia Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation (www.wvstatechapternwtf.com).

Appendix A

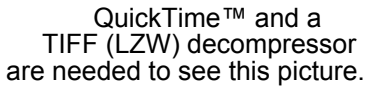
References a Wildlife Society Bulletin 2001 29(2): 407-494, ***Conservation of woody, early successional habitats and wildlife in the eastern United States*****,** editors Frank R. Thompson, Richard M. DeGraaf and Margaret K. Trani. **Sustaining biological diversity in early successional communities: the challenge of managing unpopular habitats**, by Robert A. Askins; **Patterns and trends of early successional forests in the eastern United States** by Margaret K. Trani, Robert T. Brooks, Thomas L. Schmidt, Victor A. Rudis and Christine M. Gabbard; **Historical and ecological roles of disturbance in eastern North American forests: 9,000 years of change** by Craig G. Lorimer; **Conservation of disturbance-dependent birds in eastern North America** by William C. Hunter, David A. Buehler, Ronald A. Canterbury, John L. Confer and Paul B. Hamel; **Importance of early successional habitat to ruffed grouse and American woodcock** by Daniel R. Dessecker and Daniel G. McAuley; **Importance of early successional habitats to mammals in eastern forests** by John A. Litvaitis; **Human dimension of early successional landscapes in the eastern United States** by Paul H. Gobster and **Conservation approaches for woody, early successional communities in the eastern United States** by Frank R. Thompson, III, and Richard M. DeGraaf.

Appendix B

References an article in ***BIRD CONSERVATION*** Summer 2006 titled **Early Successional Habitats In Eastern Deciduous Forests** discussing the threatened nature of early successional habitats and focuses on several priority bird species , Golden-winged, Kentucky and Prairie Warblers as well as Henslow's Sparrow and Northern Bobwhite Quail, that are affected by these habitat shortages in the East.

Appendix C

Contains graphs of Fall Buck Deer and Spring Turkey harvests in non-managed wilderness areas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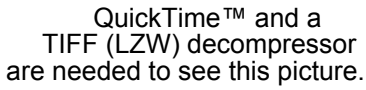
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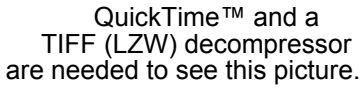
Appendix D

Contains graph of declining Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) - Goal vs. Actual, 1987-2004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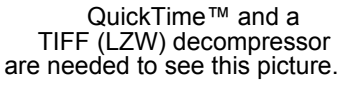
Appendix E

Contains table of productive years for mast producing species on the Mon Forest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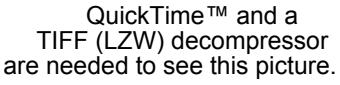
Appendix F

Contains map illustrating manageable areas of the Monongahela National Forest. Does not include areas that would be deducted for special conditions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