

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 14th, 2011

Ms. Elizabeth Agpaoa
Regional Forester
U.S. Forest Service
Southern Region
1720 Peachtree Rd, NW
Atlanta, GA 30309

Dear Ms. Agpaoa,

We are writing with respect to the George Washington National Forest draft Management Plan. As you know, the George Washington National Forest contains 1.1 million acres located near the Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Richmond metropolitan areas. It is a major recreational resource for residents of Virginia, Maryland, and West Virginia. Its watersheds supply drinking water for the Washington, D.C. and Richmond metropolitan areas. Residents throughout our region have a direct stake in the management of the forest. Finally, it is a *National* Forest that we have a responsibility to conserve for future generations.

For these reasons, we applaud many of the recommended changes in the draft management plan. We strongly encourage you to maintain draft language which would prohibit horizontal gas drilling anywhere on the forest. Horizontal drilling and associated hydraulic fracturing, which was exempted from the Safe Water Drinking Act in 2005, threaten water supplies throughout the Marcellus shale formation. We must not imperil the largely pristine headwaters of the forest and our drinking water supply by allowing such poorly regulated drilling to occur on forest lands. If such drilling were to occur, it would endanger the drinking water for downstream metropolitan areas and one of America's top two biodiverse regions—the Southern Appalachian Mountains.

We also support draft Management Plan language which would take additional steps to protect water supplies and sensitive species such as native brook trout. For example, the draft identifies sources of public drinking water supplies, expands the width of riparian protection corridors, and recommends altering road crossings to maintain stream connectivity and protect fish passage, and provide greater protection for caves and special geologic areas. The forest provides some of our region's last intact habitat for sensitive riparian species, and it is imperative that the final Management Plan protect these irreplaceable resources. One of the goals of improved riparian protection is enhanced resilience to climate change.

We support the draft Management Plan's efforts to link riparian stewardship with other components of climate change adaptation. Unfortunately, the detrimental impacts of climate change on this region are already apparent, as the mean water temperature of the Chesapeake Bay rises and tree species such as the sugar maple migrate north. Rising temperatures, more extreme rain events and drought, and unprecedented extreme heat will place great stress on forest ecosystems, including unique ecosystems such as mountaintop stands of spruce and riparian hemlock corridors. We strongly support inclusion of climate adaptation language in the plan and

related language, such as substantially more aggressive management of invasive species. Climate change will make the forest more susceptible to invasive species like the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid, so we must be more aggressive in suppressing invasive species such as the Woolly Adelgid.

Several other species in addition to hemlock will require concerted restoration efforts, including American chestnut and red spruce. These species are vital to healthy forest ecosystems, and we strongly support inclusion of draft language to support restoration of these species. We also support related protection of sensitive forest areas including but not limited to Talus and Shale Barrens and Caves and Karstlands.

We also support enhanced protection for roadless areas of the forest. As you know, George Washington National Forest is home to the largest roadless area east of the Mississippi, the Little River watershed. We applaud your inclusion of a recommended Wilderness Study area for 9,000 acres of Little River as well as the nearby addition of 6,000 acres to the Ramseys Draft Wilderness area. Draft plan language in support of road decommissioning and expanded protection for Special Biologic Areas is a good start. However, we would encourage you to strengthen plan language for Shenandoah Mountain and certain other roadless areas.

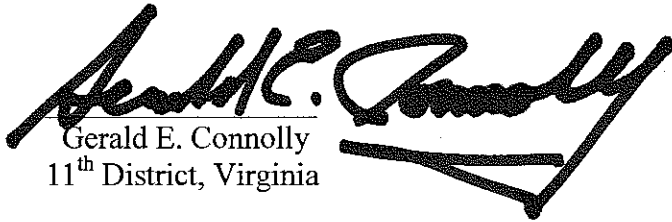
As the largest mountain in the forest, the source of the James and Potomac Rivers, and home to threatened species such as the cow knob salamander, Shenandoah Mountain is a very special place and deserves the strongest possible protection. A stakeholder group composed of wilderness advocates, hunters, mountain bikers, and off road vehicle users has been working on a consensus proposal that would recommend protection of Shenandoah Mountain as a proposed National Scenic Area. We strongly endorse this proposal or expanded Wilderness recommendations which would conserve the extraordinary roadless areas of Shenandoah Mountain. In addition, we support stronger protections for other outstanding roadless areas than those in the recommended draft plan (G). Draft Alternatives C and F have stronger Management Plan language for Laurel Fork, Beechlick Knob, Big Schloss, Kelley Mountain, Massanutten, Rich Hole, Skidmore Fork, and other roadless forest tracts.

In an urbanizing region, these roadless areas offer unique, irreplaceable refuge for threatened species, wildlife, and ultimately humans. We have a responsibility to leave these extraordinary places undisturbed so that future generations may experience them in their natural condition. By strengthening area-specific Management Plan language for these roadless areas, we can protect these places for the next generation. As the stakeholder discussions have demonstrated, these roadless areas can be protected while maintaining hunting access, possibly expanding OHV trails within existing designated OHV areas, maintaining mountain bike access, and maintaining areas for harvest of timber.

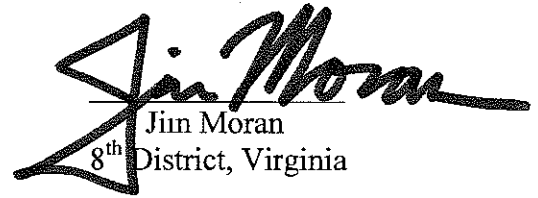
Protecting remaining roadless areas, in conjunction with maintaining draft language prohibiting hydraulic fracturing and strengthening riparian protections, will directly contribute to restoration of the Chesapeake Bay. We appreciate your efforts to align this Management Plan revision with cross-agency efforts to restore the Bay in accordance with President Obama's Executive Order. As documented by the Chesapeake Bay Conservancy, forest cover is closely related to watershed health. The George Washington and Monongahela National Forests are the single largest federal holdings in the Bay watershed. By protecting their forest cover and preventing introduction of new pollution sources like hydraulic fracturing, we can expedite Bay restoration. Other Management Plan revisions such as road decommissioning also will contribute to Bay restoration by reducing sediment pollution.

To date, the Forest Service has held three Management Plan public input sessions in the National Capital Region. We applaud your agency's unprecedented efforts to reach out to stakeholders who live in the largest urban areas near the forest, and believe that these sessions provided our constituents with an opportunity to engage in the Management Plan process. These hearings also demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of our constituents with an interest in the forest support stronger protections for roadless areas and drinking water supplies. We greatly appreciate the strong Management Plan language you have already drafted, and request that you also consider the aforementioned changes to protect our region's most spectacular roadless areas.

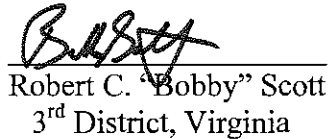
Sincerely,



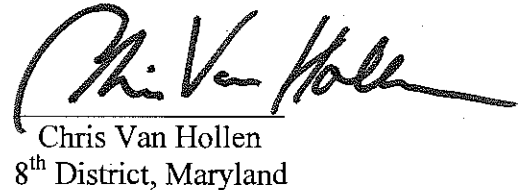
Gerald E. Connolly
11th District, Virginia



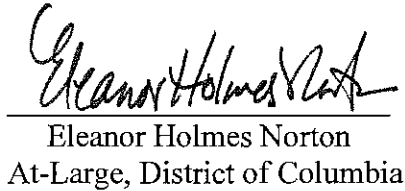
Jim Moran
8th District, Virginia



Robert C. "Bobby" Scott
3rd District, Virginia



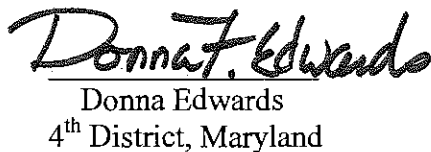
Chris Van Hollen
8th District, Maryland



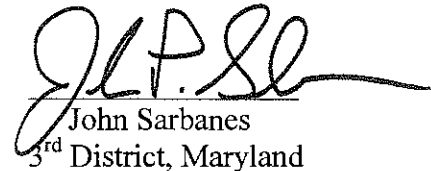
Eleanor Holmes Norton
At-Large, District of Columbia



Elijah E. Cummings
7th District, Maryland



Donna Edwards
4th District, Maryland



John Sarbanes
3rd District, Maryland