

Statement of Tom R Davenport,
Business Manager for Mt Rogers Outfitters

For The Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands of the House Natural
Resources Committee

Regarding H.R. 1011, the *Virginia Ridge and Valley Act*

May 10, 2007

Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to express my views as a businessperson on H. R. 1011, the *Virginia Ridge and Valley Act*, introduced by Representative Rick Boucher.

I am the business manager for Mt Rogers Outfitters, an outdoor recreation retail establishment focused primarily on the backpacking and hiking segment of the market.

I am a relative newcomer to the retail industry; the first 25 years of my career were in manufacturing management.

I am pleased now to be a part of a growing sector of the U. S. economy rather than a declining one. Nationwide the outdoor recreation retail industry generates \$289 billion annually in retail sales and services. This makes outdoor recreation retailing big business, exceeding the sales contributions of several economic sectors, including pharmaceutical and medicine manufacturing; automobile and light truck manufacturing; power generation and supply; securities, commodity contracts, and investing; legal services; and the motion picture and video industry.

Outdoor recreation retailing is also big business in the southeast. Of nine geographic census divisions in the U. S., the South Atlantic Region, which includes Virginia, generates more active outdoor recreation sales than any other, followed by the Pacific Region. In our region the industry generates \$51.3 billion in retail sales annually and supports nearly 800,000 jobs.

One significant feature about our industry is that you do not have to be a big operator to participate. It does, however, require a fair measure of entrepreneurial talent, and it requires a significant natural resource attraction.

Our business is a small operation. We are located in Damascus, VA, a small community (population 981) surrounded on three sides by National Forest lands. Our business was the first outdoor retail business in Damascus, founded in 1991 by Dave Patrick, who, the previous year, was the first person from the area to complete a thru hike of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (AT). The Appalachian Trail, in fact, follows a course down the main street of Damascus and on the sidewalk in front of our store.

Long distance hikers and backpacking enthusiasts recognize the area around Damascus as an outstanding backpacking venue. The June, 2006 edition of *Backpacker Magazine* highlighted the section of the AT from Grayson Highlands to Damascus as the best weekend hike on the entire AT. The article refers to our store as “the ATs top hiking store”. Last year, the Wall Street Journal ran a feature about the “Trail Days” festival in Damascus, an event that draws maybe 20,000 people to our small town for a reunion and celebration of the hiking adventure.

The economy of the town of Damascus is highly dependent on the National Forest and the natural resources and scenic quality of the area. We do have one light industrial facility on the outskirts of town and one general service grocery store. All other economic activity revolves around outdoor recreation, mostly on National Forest. People come to Damascus, not because there is something to do or see in the town, but because of the recreational opportunities in the National Forest.

So far, we have managed to build our economic base locally, meaning that there are no regional or national chain-store franchises operating in the town—with the exception of gasoline service stations and one minor food establishment.

The vast majority of the customers and clients that we serve at Mt Rogers Outfitters come from outside the area, even outside the state of Virginia. North Carolina, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Florida stand out as major sources of our customer base. We are, therefore, bringing “new” money into the area. We provide a variety of products and services for the customer. We emphasize gear that is functional (as opposed to gadgetry or fashion); we emphasize fit and performance (providing impromptu demonstrations and comparisons of products along with fit workshops); we provide detailed consultation in planning the ventures; we provide a bunkhouse for overnight stays in town; and we provide transportation to and from various trailheads. More importantly, we provide a gateway to a valued resource—one our customers cannot access in their home area.

Many of our customers are, or become, long distance hikers or they seek off trail adventures to strengthen their outdoor skills and enhance their outdoor experience. Most of our customers value the solitude, remoteness, and natural qualities associated with the National Forests in our region. The comments we hear from these folks show that they connect with the mountains and forest in a very powerful and dynamic way, and that their experience elicits very strong emotions.

Because of the nature of our business, because of our proximity to National Forest lands, and because of our interest, and our customer’s interest, in the quality of our outdoor recreational opportunities and experience, we have been actively involved in participation in the management of the National Forest. We help maintain trails, we collaborate in public participation opportunities, and we participated in the forest plan revision process.

During that planning process we advocated for Wilderness recommendations for Seng Mountain, Raccoon Branch, Garden Mountain, Hunting Camp/Little Wolf Creek, and for

the proposed additions to Lewis Fork and Little Wilson Creek. These are the areas most frequently visited by our customers according to our shuttle records.

We readily acknowledge that the management activities of the Forest Service in our service area have been generally sound and reasonable. The managers of the Mt Rogers National Recreation Area have been supportive and responsive to the needs of our business as well as the other outdoor recreation businesses that have recently sprung up in Damascus. We view the Forest Service as a partner and share credit with them for the economic revitalization in our community.

We think we are being realistic, however, in recognizing that the direction of National Forest management can swing on political considerations independent of our ability to control or influence them.

We think it is in our economic self interest to secure the present and future integrity of a few of the best places. Indeed we think it is in the economic self-interest of much of the rural portion of the region encompassed by the Ninth Congressional District. We were pleased to see the Smyth County and Bland County boards of supervisors endorse the permanent protection of these special areas in their counties. Given the scale and distribution of Federal lands in the District, outdoor recreation retail sales could play an increasingly significant role in other local economies, just as it does in Damascus.

Economics is about how to best utilize our natural, human, and capital resources to ensure our long range future. The designations contained in the Ridge and Valley Act provide the most secure assurance that a key component of our economic vitality—our resource attraction—remains a high quality resource. We ask you to advance the *Virginia Ridge and Valley Act*.