

**TESTIMONY OF
GERALD L. GRAY
CLINTWOOD VIRGINIA**

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND
PUBLIC LANDS**

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 allowing me to testify today in support of H.R. 1011, the Virginia Ridge and Valley Act.

I am Gerald Gray. I am a resident of Dickenson County, in Southwestern Virginia. Dickenson County borders Kentucky, and is home to a portion of the Jefferson National Forest near the top of the mountain ridge which separates the two states. Although my home county is not slated for wilderness or other designation, the proposed Stone Mountain Wilderness is located in nearby Lee County.

I have lived and practiced law in Dickenson County for over 30 years. During that time, I have served as the Commonwealth's Attorney (1984-1991). I am currently a member of the Boards of the Dickenson County Industrial Development Authority, The Ralph Stanley Museum and Traditional Mountain Music Center, and the Dickenson County Chamber of Commerce.

I also am the President and Chair of the Board of Directors of Virginia Forest Watch, a <http://www.virginiaforestwatch.org> grass-roots based coalition of individuals and environmental groups, and I am a board member and serve on the Executive Committee of the Virginia Conservation Network, <http://www.vcnva.org> a statewide coalition of conservation groups, which is also the Virginia affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation.

I am here to testify today, not as a representative of any of those organizations, but as an individual who personally enjoys our forestlands and who recognizes the need to protect the special places of the Jefferson National Forest.

Mr. Chairman, I enjoy the woods. I am a fly-fisherman and have fished many of the rivers and creeks in the Jefferson National Forest, including those in existing wilderness areas. I have caught many (and released most) native trout throughout the National Forests in Virginia and elsewhere. I fully support public ownership and stewardship of our public lands.

My wife and I are avid horseback riders. We have ridden many of the trails within the Jefferson National Forest, including those in existing wilderness areas. We have many friends who share our passion for the woods, and the trails in the National Forests. I believe that horseback riding gives a unique perspective of the natural beauty of our forests.

That is why I fully support H.R. 1011. This legislation would protect nearly 55,000 acres of the Jefferson National Forest as wilderness, wilderness study or national scenic areas. It is a balanced bill resulting from an open process of public consultation and input. As a result of this inclusive process the bill enjoys broad support in the local communities.

I particularly want to commend Senator Warner and my Congressman, Rick Boucher, for introducing the Virginia Ridge and Valley Act and for the process that they used in developing their bill.

As the Committee may be aware, most of the areas included in H. R. 1011 are based upon the recommendations of the National Forest Service or else were endorsed by the local County Boards of Supervisors. These criteria, developed by Congressman Boucher and Senator Warner, maximized public participation.

My wife and I participated in the forest planning process for the Jefferson. We attended planning meetings held throughout the area, participated in the various working groups and submitted our comments.

I believe that the final Forest Plan fell short of providing the level of protection and wilderness that a majority of the public had supported. I believe that it is essential that we protect and preserve those rare treasures available in the Jefferson. I believe that it is essential that our children and their children have the opportunity to experience the wonder and beauty of our National Forests.

To reach the final result as expressed in the Virginia Ridge and Valley Act, the Forest Service process was supplemented by several Boards of Supervisors' actions. Under this process, citizens were able to present their views to their local elected officials who were able to consider areas within the local context. At the local level, the citizen's voices were heard. The result as expressed in the Act was a blending of the Forest Service process and local input. It is a comprehensive approach, which I hope that the Sub-Committee will support.

Some critics of this legislation claim wilderness designation will put these areas off-limits to hunting, fishing or horseback riding. I can assure the Committee that nothing is further from the truth. In fact, I believe that wilderness designation is essential to maintain the pristine quality of these areas. By so doing, the quality of the experience is maintained and improved.

Southwestern Virginia is blessed with many creeks and rivers within our forestlands. These waters are a crucial lifeline for native trout and for local communities.

Unfortunately these rivers and streams face problems of development – more contaminants and increased sedimentation from logging-absent the protection offered by the Wilderness and other designation.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I would urge the Committee to approve H.R. 1011. This bill is the result of extensive public input and is crucial to maintaining-and improving- a high quality of life in Southwestern Virginia.

Thank you. I will be glad to answer any questions that you may have.