

**Statement of  
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**Before the**

**Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands  
Natural Resources Committee  
United States House of Representatives**

**February 26, 2008**

**Concerning**

**H.R. 5151, Wild Monongahela Act:  
A National Legacy for West Virginia's Special Places**

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to provide the Administration's view on the Wild Monongahela Act: A National Legacy for West Virginia's Special Places.

H.R. 5151 would designate about 47,128 acres of the Monongahela National Forest as wilderness, adding to three existing wilderness areas and designating four new ones. The Administration supports designation of Cheat Mountain, Cranberry Expansion, Dry Fork Expansion, and Roaring Plains West as wilderness. For all four areas, wilderness designation would be consistent with recommendations by the Monongahela National Forest in its 2006 forest plan revision.

We do not object to wilderness designation for the other three areas proposed by the bill. In the environmental impact statement that accompanied the 2006 forest plan revision, the Monongahela National Forest determined that Big Draft, the Dolly Sods Expansion, and Spice Run are all available for wilderness designation. The Monongahela National Forest designated all three areas as "semiprimitive nonmotorized" in order to help maintain their roadless attributes over time while still permitting other established uses.

The Monongahela National Forest has five existing wilderness areas, all of which offer outstanding wilderness experiences. I have personally visited some of the seven areas proposed in this bill, and I believe that all seven areas have outstanding wilderness attributes. All are rugged forested land minimally affected by outside forces, with natural processes operating and vestiges of human impacts (such as old roads and clearcuts) rapidly healing over. Ranging in elevation from just under 2,000 feet to over 4,000 feet, these landscapes harbor rare ecosystems (such as high-elevation red spruce) and habitat for federally listed species.

That is why the Monongahela National Forest recommended four of the seven areas for wilderness study in its revised forest plan in 2006: Cheat Mountain, Cranberry Expansion, Dry Fork Expansion, and Roaring Plains West. These units represent nearly 27,700 acres recommended for wilderness study. The Administration supports their inclusion in this bill.

In its forest plan revision, after consulting with the public, the Monongahela National Forest decided not to include Big Draft, the Dolly Sods Expansion, and Spice Run among the areas recommended for wilderness. Instead, we designated all three as semiprimitive nonmotorized areas, one of the most restrictive allocations that the Forest Service can give. This management prescription protects their naturalness while permitting such popular and relatively low-impact uses as mountain biking. It also allows the manipulation of vegetation to create wildlife openings.

However, we recognize the wilderness eligibility of all three areas, and their designation as wilderness would be consistent with values that the Monongahela National Forest's revised forest plan is designed to protect. In other locations, the Monongahela National Forest maintains opportunities for mountain biking and for manipulating vegetation to improve wildlife habitat. Therefore, the Administration would not object to including Big Draft, the Dolly Sods Expansion, and Spice Run in this bill if boundary adjustments and other issues are addressed.

If all seven areas are designated as wilderness, we would suggest adjusting some of the proposed boundaries to avoid conflicts and make the wilderness areas more manageable. Some proposed boundaries appear to be based on the boundaries of the roadless areas analyzed during the 2006 forest plan revision. Those roadless area boundaries were not intended to define wilderness boundaries. Adjustments should be made to account for mapping errors; to provide access to state and private land; to exclude developed sites and managed wildlife openings; to add offsets for powerlines and other features inconsistent with wilderness; and to align the boundaries with existing wilderness boundaries.

The largest boundary question regards the southwestern corner of the proposed Spice Run unit, an area of 974 acres. This area lies outside the area that the Monongahela National Forest evaluated for wilderness in its 2006 forest plan because it did not meet the criteria for roadless areas. Should it become designated wilderness, motorized access to three adjacent parcels of private land could become an issue.

We would like to work with the bill's sponsors and the subcommittee to adjust the boundaries to accommodate these and other concerns. The Forest Service has prepared a set of proposed boundary adjustments, taking care to ensure that our proposed adjustments would not detract from the overall wilderness legislation. We would welcome the opportunity to provide this information to the subcommittee.

Removing most of the structures incompatible with wilderness would not be necessary if our proposed boundary adjustments were made. Even with the adjustments, however, a hiking shelter and about 9 miles of road would remain within the wilderness boundaries. The shelter would likely be allowed to deteriorate and then removed. Unless converted to trails, the roads (currently closed to vehicular traffic) would require decommissioning to protect water quality and other natural resource values. The Monongahela National Forest would conduct an analysis to determine the appropriate management actions and then

make the investments needed, subject to available appropriations, to remove culverts, construct trail, or contour the land to reduce erosion.

We strongly support the spirit of this legislation, and we confirm that all seven areas proposed for wilderness designation meet the criteria for wilderness. Working with the subcommittee, we are confident that we can remedy boundary deficiencies and establish final wilderness boundaries that are sound and manageable.

This concludes my prepared statement, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.