

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND
PUBLIC LAND**

**LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON H.R. 1011 – VIRGINIA RIDGE AND
VALLEY ACT OF 2007**

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Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for inviting me to this hearing on HR 1011.

I am here today representing my organization, the Southern Appalachian Multiple-Use Council. We were established in 1975 by a group of businessmen who thought the multiple-use concept of land management for our national forests was a pretty good way to approach landscape stewardship. Our mission is to promote the balanced protection of forestland values (water, fish & wildlife, timber, recreation and wilderness) across our region.

With membership in several Appalachian states, including Virginia, we regularly participate in forest planning throughout the region on seven national forests. We have supported many activities initiated by Congress, administrations, and the US Forest Service. We have also opposed plans that we felt weren't consistent with long-standing directives by Congress or showed bad judgment regarding natural resource management. H.R. 1011 is one of these proposed actions we adamantly oppose for it does not follow the directives of Congress and, in our view, is bad judgment for managing large areas of public lands.

The Virginia Ridge and Valley Act of 2007 came as quite a shock to us publics who monitor federal land issues in the region. It virtually tosses out 8 years of contentious debate on the revision of the Jefferson National Forest plan approved by the US Forest Service in 2004.

During the Jefferson NF debate wilderness potential, according to the planning process and the Wilderness Act of 1964, was highly scrutinized by teams of stakeholders. The result was 25,243 acres of suitable national forest land designated as "Wilderness Study Areas." This designation means that the Forest Service has studied the areas and recommends them for wilderness through the legislative process.

We disagreed with the Forest Service about the plan's recommendations regarding "Wilderness Study Areas" for a number of reasons. We felt that some areas were completely surrounded by private lands, some contained important infrastructure (roads and power lines) and private inholdings. These designations would also eliminate many recreation activities long-established in the areas, and restrict needed active management for wildlife, including threatened and endangered species. It was our view that these lands should have been removed from wilderness consideration because they didn't meet the basic criteria for wilderness designation as defined by Congress.

After reading the bill we were astounded to find that not only had recommended wilderness areas been expanded, but also a new wilderness study area had been created; and, the bill included a new category of highly restricted "National Scenic Areas." The total acres involved amounted to over 54,000 acres, all of which could be characterized as "wilderness" or defacto wilderness. These additions contain many of the same elements that should, under Congress's direction for wilderness and special areas designation, disqualify them from consideration and remain in active management status.

Obviously, the Virginia Ridge and Valley Act of 2007 is an attempt to circumvent the long-standing process of public input and evaluation, established by Congress, for the permanent dedication of public lands to the most restrictive of federal designations.

Just how restrictive?

Congressionally designated wilderness areas allow motorized vehicles and equipment by the administrative agency only under catastrophic conditions. The only wildlife management technique allowed is prescribed burning, and to our knowledge there has never been a prescribed burn in any wilderness area in the region. Any preventive measures for catastrophic forest health issues, such as fire, insect and disease can be employed only after many hoops and approval at the highest levels of the federal bureaucracy.

In the specific case of HR 1011, 19,241 acres of the proposed additional wilderness or defacto wilderness are already designated in the Jefferson Forest Plan as Backcountry. Backcountry provides a near-wilderness-like experience for man and beast. The difference is that it allows for routine management for forest health and fire control. In Montgomery County some of these acres back up to an extensive housing development – only a step away from wilderness wildfire. Backcountry protects the land. Wilderness limits the human endeavor.

What isn't surprising about HR 1011 are the environmental groups that worked with Congressional offices to draft the bill and promote it in the region. The Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC) and their offspring Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition (SAFC), have lobbied long and hard for permanent land "protections" across the region. We know a lot about them because we have had to fight them every step of the way to actively manage public lands for many years.

For instance, we know that their ultimate agenda is an elaborate plan to set aside a minimum of 50% of the land in the United States in wilderness or highly restricted designations for the protection of "biodiversity." The plan is called *The Wildlands Project* and is well documented on the Internet.

An excellent web site describing the Project's plan for this region is www.wildlandsprojectrevealed.org . There you will find such strategies as closing major highways (including the Blue Ridge Parkway), removing major dams, and creating a

regional economic system based on organic farming. You will also find the names of environmental organizations, including SELC and SAFC, developing and supporting The Wildlands Project. It is interesting to discover that their activities are financed predominately through large grants from foundations, not grass roots activism and membership contributions.

Mr. Chairman, we believe that wilderness is a legitimate and worthy use of public lands. However, perpetuity is a long time and thoughtful consideration and open public debate prior to Congressional action are essential – just as the Code of Federal Regulations requires and the Jefferson National Forest plan revision provides. It would be a travesty to approve the Virginia Ridge and Valley Act of 2007 designed by environmentalists with a hidden agenda, and without the careful scrutiny Congress has demanded on public land activities across the country.

Thanks again for the subcommittee's time and consideration.

Steve Henson
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