

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

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### Statement / Witness Testimony

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SHAWNEE TRAIL CONSERVANCY  
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The Shawnee Trail Conservancy (STC) is a multi-use recreational group located in Southern Illinois and concentrates its efforts primarily in the Shawnee National Forest (SNF). We promote all forms of recreation, and believe that recreation on National Forest (NF) can happen in an environmentally sound manner that also benefits and promotes the local community and all citizens.

SNF is located in extreme Southern Illinois (see map) and is comprised of approximately 288,000 acres. It has been established by the purchase of ground from private land owners from the 1930's to present. It is an oak / hickory forest with many private property openings and cemeteries dispersed throughout the 9-County tip of Southern Illinois. The last FS Plan was implemented in 1992. It contained the usual mix of recreation, timber, mining and environmental set-asides. Since 1992 all logging on the Shawnee has been halted, mining and oil exploration has been stopped and none of the recreational part of the Plan has been put on the ground. However, the environmental side of the Plan has been completed. We now have Wilderness and Natural areas. These Natural areas are State designated and Federally enforced. The Natural areas were not to be closed to recreation, primarily equestrian, until there were trails put through them for equestrian and hiker use, but they were closed before any trails were implemented. The only thing you can do in these areas is day hike. These Natural areas do NOT receive Federal designation or qualify under any Federal statute to be on Federal lands. The natural area size designation has grown, in many instances doubled, since the 1992 Plan. These outstanding scenic areas are the sights most sought to see by all visitors to the SNF, but there is NO ACCESS unless you day hike and there are NO TRAILS.

Equestrian use in Illinois brings in approximately 3.8 BILLION dollars annually. It is a huge source of tourism dollars for the local area as well as for Illinois. It is estimated that equestrian campgrounds in Southern Illinois brings in 37 million dollars to the local economy. The most sought after areas to ride are in the SNF, but with the CLOSURE of many of the attractive areas people are asking WHY are these areas closed to the very people who helped purchase the land with their tax dollars. When our group has asked the FS why the 623 miles of equestrian/hiker/biker/ATV trails have not been put on the ground since the Plan of 1992, we hear the FS response as lack of funding and manpower. There is only one person in the SNF assigned to recreational trail maintenance. All user groups have agreed to recreation user fees to offset the costs of maintenance, signage, mapping, trailhead facilities and trail creation. Our group has volunteered to do maintenance on user created trails and our requests have been denied by the FS.

There were to be 286 miles of ATV/equestrian/hiker trails created in the plan of 1992. In 1995, some of the same people who agreed to the 1992 Plan, formed a new group and sued the SNF on several issues of the 1992 Plan, and they won. The judge ordered the FS to restudy the part of the Plan on effects of ATV use and logging. That order was issued in 1995 and to this date the FS has yet to obey the courts order.

SNF is now entering into a new planning process and the Plan of 1992 that took 10 years to create has yet to be implemented. It appears that the FS does not want recreation on the SNF. The planning process takes a long time, and a lot of personal time dedicated to complete a FS Plan. When a Plan is finally signed off on, there are no assurances that it will be implemented.

There should be a better way to enforce a Plan when agreed to by all parties involved.

The proposed roadless issue has already reached a local level. Because SNF, like many NF in the east, was purchased from private land owners there are many "old roads" that intertwine through SNF. In SNF the "old roads" have never been formally closed or vacated by Illinois statute and therefore remain under local jurisdiction. SNF claims many of these roads and classifies them as FS roads or Forest development roads and asserts their jurisdiction on them.

Pope County is made up of 48% SNF . It has filed a notice of intent to sue the FS over the jurisdiction of these roads (see exhibit). At a meeting of the Pope county Commissioners on March 28, 2000 they voted unanimously to proceed with a suit to quiet the title of these roads. There where approximately 250 people in attendance and the almost unanimous majority of the people supported the action. They voted at the same meeting to oppose ANY roadless initiative that would effect Pope County (see exhibit).

There is an area in the SNF called the Burk Branch area. It was asked to be listed as a Wilderness area in the 1992 Plan. It was denied wilderness status ( see exhibit) because of the immense road system in it. It would be better suited for OHV use and recreation according to the 1992 Plan. This is the same area that now is being considered part of the roadless areas. This area is not roadless by FS standards or Pope county local laws.

This same area in Burk Branch has an old road that runs through a Natural area. This road has been gated at both ends to close off any travel. Pope county is suing over the FS denying the public the use of this road which the public wants to remain open. The same road, and its use, has been taken to the 7<sup>th</sup> circuit court of appeals in Chicago. Oral arguments were given on March 29th. The road issue in the SNF has gone from being a quiet local issue to one that will be used as a yardstick for the rest of the country.

Some groups say the over whelming majority of the people support the roadless issue. How far from the truth that is! Go to your local people in your area and ask you constituents what they think--you will find that very FEW people support this issue.

### Conclusion

The FS is not listening to WE the PEOPLE. They do not treat citizens like these are our lands. All recreational users desire conservation and protection of our lands, and believe this is possible along with being able to enjoy and appreciate the beauty of the land while recreating there. We the people work hard, pay taxes and want to be able to recreate on our NF lands. We are the parents of future generations and wish to pass on a lasting legacy to posterity that they will be able to see, value and enjoy.

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