

**STATEMENT**

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT of AGRICULTURE**

**BEFORE THE  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS & PUBLIC LANDS  
MAY 10, 2007**

**CONCERNING:**

**H.R. 1011 – Virginia Ridge and Valley Act of 2007**

Thank you for the opportunity today to provide the Department's view on H.R. 1011, the Virginia Ridge and Valley Act of 2007. I am Joel Holtrop, Deputy Chief, National Forest System of the Forest Service. I look forward to working with this committee on issues affecting the Forest Service.

H.R. 1011 would designate 27,817 acres in the Jefferson National Forest as new components of the National Wilderness Preservation System. Specifically, the bill would designate the following areas: Brush Mountain East Wilderness, Brush Mountain Wilderness, Raccoon Branch Wilderness, Stone Mountain Wilderness, Hunting Camp Creek Wilderness, and Garden Mountain Wilderness. H.R. 1011 would also designate 11,344 acres as additions to existing wilderness areas namely, Mountain Lake Wilderness, Lewis Fork Wilderness, Little Wilson Creek Wilderness, Shawvers Run Wilderness, Peters Mountain Wilderness and Kimberling Creek Wilderness.

H.R. 1011 would designate 3,226 acres in the Jefferson National Forest as the "Lynn Camp Creek Wilderness Study Area." The bill also would designate 349 acres depicted on the map as the "Kimberling Creek Additions Potential Wilderness Area" as a potential wilderness area for eventual incorporation in the Kimberling Creek Wilderness. The bill would set forth requirements regarding ecological restoration within this area and would provide for the designation of the area as a wilderness within 5 years.

In addition, the bill would designate 11,583 acres of the Seng Mountain and Bear Creek areas as National Scenic Areas for purposes of ensuring the protection and preservation of scenic quality, water quality, natural characteristics, and water resources; protecting wildlife and fish habitat; protecting areas that may develop characteristics of old-growth forests; and providing a variety of recreation opportunities.

Finally the bill would direct the Secretary of Agriculture to develop a management plan for the designated national scenic areas. The Secretary also would be required to develop a trail plan for hiking and equestrian trails on lands designated as wilderness by this Act and to develop a plan for non-motorized recreation trails within the Seng Mountain and Bear Creek National Scenic Areas. The bill also would direct the Secretary to develop a sustainable non-motorized trail in Smyth County, Virginia.

We recognize and commend the delegation and the committee for its collaborative approach and local involvement that has contributed to support for this bill. The Department is in support for several of the designations included in the bill but we object to other designations in the bill and to mandatory planning and construction requirements. The Department would like to work with the Committee to offer suggestions which we think will improve H.R. 1011.

### **Wilderness Proposals**

During the development or revision of a forest land and resource management plan (LRMP), a National Forest conducts an evaluation of potential wilderness or wilderness study area that satisfies the definition of wilderness found in section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act of 1964. On NFS lands in the eastern United States (east of the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian) the criteria for evaluating potential wilderness recognizes that much, if not all of the land, shows signs of human activity and modification. The Record of Decision for the revised Jefferson National Forest LRMP, signed on January 15, 2004, was developed over an eleven year period with extensive public involvement. It contains recommendations for 25,200 acres of wilderness study areas, including new wilderness study areas and additions to existing areas designated as wilderness.

The Department supports the provisions in H.R. 1011 that would designate new components of the National Wilderness Preservation System that are consistent with the Jefferson National Forest LRMP recommendations for wilderness study. These areas include the proposed Garden Mountain and Hunting Creek Camp Wilderness areas.

The Stone Mountain area (referred to as Cave Springs area in the LRMP) is entirely underlain by Federal mineral ownership and is not currently under mineral lease. The Jefferson National Forest LRMP recommended this area for wilderness study. Congressional designation would make this the only wilderness within the Cumberland Mountain ecological section in Virginia. The Department supports designation of the Stone Mountain Wilderness Area but is also willing to work with the committee to look at other options for protection.

The Department supports the designation of additions to existing wilderness areas for the following areas: Kimberling Creek A and B additions, Lewis Fork addition, Little Wilson Creek addition, Mountain Lake A and C additions, Peters Mountain addition, and Shawvers Run A addition.

The Department does not oppose the designation of the "Lynn Camp Creek Wilderness Study Area", the Mountain Lake B addition, and Shawvers Run Additions B and C areas. However, we have concerns about the suitability of these additions as components of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) due to their size and configuration. An additional concern with the Mountain Lake addition B is that it contains a 59 acre private inholding which could require associated road access in the future if the parcel is developed.

The Department does not support the designation as "potential wilderness" for the 349 acre portion of the Kimberling Creek area. The designation "Potential Wilderness" is not a designation referenced in the Wilderness Act of 1964. A subsequent designation of wilderness following a fixed time period and associated compulsory changes in conditions can serve to limit the Secretary's discretion in the allocation of scarce resources and other management actions associated with the administration of the National Forest System and the NWPS. We use the term, potential wilderness, in our wilderness evaluation process under our LRMP efforts to evaluate areas as potential additions to the NWPS. The Kimberling Creek addition was recently acquired as NFS land and in its current condition does not contain the basic natural characteristics that make it suitable for wilderness due to an extensive road network. We would recommend that the committee consider allowing the Secretary to continue the current management prescription for this area which is Dispersed Recreation-Unsuitable. This management emphasis provides for a variety of dispersed recreation uses with minimal vegetation management and would allow use of motorized and mechanized equipment for needed road and trail rehabilitation work. We plan to develop rehabilitation plans and implement these plans within the next 5 to 10 years. While this area was not recommended as a potential wilderness area in the LMP, future wilderness designation of this area could be reevaluated after restoration activities occur.

The Department does not support wilderness designation for the Brush Mountain and Brush Mountain East areas. These areas lie on the north side of Brush Mountain and are separated by a 345 Kilovolt powerline corridor. They were not recommended for wilderness study in LRMP. They contain fire-dependent forest habitat which make up approximately 50 percent of these two areas. Additionally, the areas are largely surrounded by private lands. Wildland urban interface (subdivisions and housing developments) exists on the north and south boundaries. If designated as wilderness, our ability to utilize prescribed fire for the maintenance of southern yellow pine forest communities and to conduct hazardous fuels reduction projects would be hampered in these interface areas. Our ability to use prescribed fire is compromised when we cannot mechanically construct firelines to better control fire management activities. Additionally, the narrow width of, and the bisecting powerline corridor within these areas detract from their naturalness and offer few opportunities for solitude.

The Department could support the designation of the Raccoon Branch area as a wilderness area if agreements are reached in resolving trail maintenance issues in the area and if the requirement contained in section 5(d) of the bill for a sustainable trail is amended to provide more flexibility for any future alternative trail locations. Nearly six miles of the Virginia Highlands Horse Trail (VHHT) and the Dickey Knob Trail traverse this area. These trails are heavily used by both equestrians and mountain bikers. Wilderness designation would eliminate mountain bike use within the area. While equestrian use is compatible with wilderness designation, heavy use and ground conditions along the VHHT necessitate extensive maintenance to maintain the integrity of the trail and protect watershed and other resources values. To maintain the trail to the standards that are needed without mechanized or motorized equipment will require cooperative agreements and commitments from user groups to help in maintenance to protect the resources and to provide for continued equestrian use of the trail.

### **National Scenic Area Proposals**

Section 4 of H.R. 1011 would establish Seng Mountain and Bear Creek National Scenic Areas (NSA). Although we have concerns over the limitations on our ability to improve black bear habitat as a result of this designation, the Department could support designation of the Bear Creek NSA if allowances were made for seasonal motorized use of Forest Development Road #6251 during hunting season, with the road remaining closed the rest of the year.

The proposed Seng Mountain NSA is within the congressionally designated Mount Rogers National Recreation Area (NRA). The Mount Rogers NRA is managed to provide public outdoor recreation benefits and the continued use by a diversity of recreation uses. The Seng Mountain area contains a motorized trail, the Barton Gap Trail #4624. Motorized use of the trail would be prohibited under H.R. 1011. The Barton Gap Trail is one of only five designated motorcycle trails on the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests and is an important part of the diversity of recreation opportunities that we provide the visitors that use the Forest and the Mount Rogers NRA. The Department would like to work with the committee to resolve any confusion resulting from the overlapping designations for the Seng Mountain area. The Department could support designation of the Seng Mountain NSA if the overlapping designation issue is clarified and if continued motorized use on the Barton Gap Trail was allowed.

### **Trail Development Plans**

H.R. 1011 would require the Secretary to establish a trail plan to develop hiking and equestrian trails on lands designated as wilderness by this bill. The designated lands would be administered in accordance with the Wilderness Act. Trail development in wilderness rarely occurs in order to preserve wilderness character. The Forest Service already addresses trail management and planning standards within the LRMP planning process. The Department considers the requirement to develop additional trail plans to be unnecessary.

H.R. 1011 also would require the Secretary to develop a sustainable trail to provide a continuous connection for non-motorized travel between County Route 650 and Forest Development Road 4018. This trail would be along State Route 16. We believe that it would be costly and difficult to provide a trail in this general location that would be safe for both equestrians and mountain bikers. The existing gravel road (State Route 650), is winding and narrow and contains several blind curves. It receives high local use and is the main access road for campers and recreational vehicles to enter Hurricane Campground. Further, a potential connector trail for horses and bikes from Route 650 along the route of the old Marion-Rye Valley rail bed would require crossing State Route 16, a 55-mph state highway that receives heavy commercial use, in a location with poor sight distance. Trail construction along the stream would be unlikely to meet our Forest standards for riparian protection. The Department does not support such a requirement to construct trail facilities without adequate consideration for alternatives, priorities and funding sources.

This concludes my statement, I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.