



WEST VIRGINIA RIVERS COALITION

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Plan to Protect the ‘Birthplace of Rivers’ as a National Monument Unveiled

Proposal would create only national monument in West Virginia

Elkins, WV (September 18, 2013) – The Birthplace of Rivers Initiative, a broad statewide coalition of communities, businesses, sportsmen, river organizations, recreation and conservation groups, made public specifics of a proposal to permanently protect an iconic part of West Virginia’s Monongahela National Forest as the Birthplace of Rivers National Monument.

The proposal is the result of a collaborative process to solicit feedback over the past year from various stakeholders and the general public. The full proposal is available at www.BirthplaceOfRivers.org. Today’s release of a specific proposal is an important next step in a public process to discuss the value of preserving the recreational, scenic and heritage-based traditions West Virginians cherish on the Mountain State’s public lands.

“It is essential that we permanently preserve this area so we have clean water and healthy lands to pass down as our legacy to our children,” said Angie Rosser, Executive Director of the West Virginia Rivers Coalition. “After much collaboration, we now have a proposal that will protect the natural and cultural resources of the land while fostering economic development and maintaining access for fishing, hunting and other outdoor recreational activities that are important to many user groups and local communities.”

Treasured Landscapes

The aptly named Birthplace of Rivers National Monument is the home to the headwaters of six of West Virginia’s most highly regarded rivers - the Cranberry, Cherry, Elk, Gauley, Williams and Greenbrier Rivers. The proposed monument is limited to federal land managed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), including the:

- Cranberry Wilderness which features dense forests of red spruce, trout streams and black bear habitat;
- Tea Creek Backcountry, with some of the best mountain biking trails in the Mid-Atlantic;
- Cranberry Glades, a unique series of tundra-like bogs which shelter migratory birds and rare plants;
- The site of the former Mill Point Federal Prison which imprisoned prohibition moonshiners and conscientious objectors;
- The iconic Falls of Hills Creek which includes West Virginia’s second-highest waterfall; and

- The Highland Scenic Highway which skirts the Cranberry Wilderness, providing unparalleled views of the Williams River Valley.

Many of these special features are protected under temporary guidelines, which are always subject to future administrative changes. Such changes could drastically alter the way these areas are managed, and could compromise some of West Virginia's most popular scenic areas and most visited outdoor recreation destinations. The Birthplace of Rivers National Monument would safeguard these unique areas from potential threats by solidifying the intent of most of the area's current management.

Monument Proposal: Continued Access, Recreation and Restoration

A national monument designation would permanently protect the iconic resources in this area while providing the flexibility to meet place-specific management and access needs identified by the community.

Under the proposal, the U.S. Forest Service would continue to manage the area. Activities such as hunting, trapping and hunting with dogs would be allowed and ecosystem restoration and management by the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (WVDNR) to improve fish and game habitat would continue.

Establishment of the monument would not close any motorized routes currently open to the public and mountain biking would continue to be allowed on recognized trails. No new roads could be created in the national monument except for public safety or to provide necessary access to further the values for which the monument was established.

The monument proposal also calls for a flexible approach to spruce and spruce-hardwood restoration, a key management objective currently emphasized in much of the area. In a letter to the Pocahontas County Commission earlier this year, USFS Chief Thomas Tidwell has indicated to local officials that national monuments have strong potential to improve local economies through tourism and restoration activities.

As a national monument the federal lands within the monument would be permanently protected from potential industrial activities. A designation would also preserve valid existing rights such as previously-existing leases, grazing and rights-of-way. No private lands would be affected by the proposed monument.

“A National Monument would provide a balanced, flexible designation that serves as an honor to the Mountain State and meet the access and management needs of this special area,” said Mike Costello, Executive Director of the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition. “The current proposal reflects a sincere willingness from many West Virginians to come to the table and collectively address certain issues and create a vision for what we want the protected future of this special land to look like.”

Economic Benefits of Monument Designation

In addition to establishing stronger protections, a [recent independent economic report](#) indicates that a national monument designation could support 143 jobs and bring a total of \$5.2 million in economic activity to the region annually. The designation could also generate a total of more than \$800,000 annually in tax revenue which would help support libraries, hospitals, emergency services and local arts programs.

“This is an important step toward a brighter economic future for this region of West Virginia,” says Lewisburg Mayor John Manchester. “Signature protected lands like national monuments have been shown to make communities more attractive places for people to live and work. Local residents are likely to see numerous benefits including additional jobs, greater support for community institutions and more entrepreneurial opportunities.”

Opportunity to Protect Land That Defines the Mountain State

The Birthplace of Rivers is home to some of West Virginia's most dramatic vistas, tallest waterfalls, cleanest waterways, and a series of sphagnum bogs forgotten by time. The national monument would also marry West Virginians' love for the land and its renowned musical heritage.

"The natural beauty of our Mountain State is one of the greatest gifts God has given to West Virginia. Establishing the Birthplace of Rivers National Monument will allow us to pass this legacy on to our children" said Rev. Jeffrey S. Allen, Executive Director of the West Virginia Council of Churches. "This endeavor is about preserving the history, the heritage, and the rich mountain culture of West Virginia. It is about birthing a new economy for the people West Virginia."

The Birthplace of Rivers would be the only National Monument in West Virginia, and would be the first managed by the USFS in the eastern United States. A national monument can be designated either by Congress or the President.

The full proposal can be found at www.BirthplaceOfRivers.org/proposal.html.

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The Birthplace of Rivers Initiative is a collaborative effort bringing business owners and community leaders together with organizations including the West Virginia Rivers Coalition, West Virginia Council of Churches, the International Mountain Biking Association, West Virginia Council of Trout Unlimited and the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition.
www.BirthplaceOfRivers.org