

Michael Price  
President  
USW Local 8-89  
AFL-CIO

H.R. 5151 : The Wild Monongahela: A Legacy for West Virginia's Special Places  
February 26, 2008 at 10:00 A.M.

On October 2, 2007 at the West Virginia AFL-CIO's Constitutional Convention in Wheeling, WV over one hundred eighty delegates representing many different unions unanimously voted to adopt a resolution to "Secure Permanent Protection For West Virginia's Wilderness Forest Areas" as proposed by the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition. This included Seneca Creek, all of Roaring Plains and the East Fork of the Greenbrier in addition to area in H.R. 5151.

The Convention delegates took this action to support Wilderness legislation believing that protecting one of our states most valued assets, its scenic beauty, will help enable the development of rural communities. People are attracted to, and businesses want to locate or stay in, places that offer a high quality of life, are clean, beautiful and where there are ample opportunity to connect with nature.

These Wilderness areas provide outdoor recreation such as hunting, fishing and hiking which improves the quality of life for West Virginians. Wildlife management to restore native wildlife populations can continue to occur in wilderness areas so long as it maintains the wilderness character of the area. Wilderness designation is the best way to protect sensitive wildlife species from development pressures.

Wilderness protects watersheds, provides clean air, and provides a healthy environment for neighboring communities. Watershed protection results in protection of clean drinking water sources and the lack of disturbance decreases potential for flooding downstream.

West Virginia's more than fifteen million acres are nearly 80% forested. 98% of this forest land is classified as timberland or "commercial forest land." 98% of these commercial forest lands are owned by private individuals or corporations. Wilderness designation would have no impact on these private lands that produce over 95% of West Virginia's commercially harvested timber. The wilderness proposal put forth would affect only 0.5% of the state's commercial timberland, thus preserving West Virginia's timber - based economy while providing for the enhancement of a broad array of other forest uses. After all the Monongahela National Forest's slogan is "Land of Many Uses."

Protecting wilderness helps diversify and stabilize economies by attracting and retaining business, residents and a local workforce in addition to generating travel and tourism, one of the fastest growing sections of West Virginia's economy. The AFL-CIO

recognizes that wilderness designation will attract businesses creating many job opportunities now and into the future. Union's have always supported legislation which creates jobs and protects the health and a healthy environment.

I am a United Steel Worker member affiliated with the AFL-CIO and I am also an Outings Leader with the Sierra Club. The USW has a "Blue/ Green Alliance" with the Sierra Club which works together on environmental issues. Union's recognize the importance of protecting our special places, the environment, and creating "green based job opportunities." As a Sierra Club Outings Leader, having protected special places in the Monongahela creates endless opportunities for me to share our state's beautiful wild places with others.

The designation of wilderness to the areas proposed in the Wild Monongahela Act will enhance the economy of West Virginia and the quality of life for West Virginians. It will ensure that future generations have unspoiled wilderness to enjoy as we do today.

To speak specifically about one particular area of importance included in the Wild Monongahela Act, I'll quote Elizabeth Little of Hillsboro, WV who has likely spent more time in this area than any one else alive:

'In the summer of 1995, I spent the day with a Forest Service team and a group of concerned citizens touring the Little Fork Area, part of what is now the Cranberry Expansion. This was occasioned by the Forest Service announcement that they were preparing a management plan for the area.

On that field trip and in an ensuing letter, I pointed out to the Forest Service that the adjacent Cranberry Wilderness wasn't big enough.

Previously, a Forest Service Ranger from the Gauley District and I had walked across the Cranberry at a long oblique angle in only six hours, even though we stopped frequently to converse with several hunters in camps along the way. This means the existing Wilderness provides a minimal range for large wildlife that is intolerant of disturbance. Since the Cranberry is already the largest Wilderness in the Mon and is bounded by roads on all other sides, the Cranberry Expansion is the only possibility for providing a larger undisturbed territory.

Apparently they heard me. When I phoned the next year to find out how their planning was going, the team leader informed me that they had tabled the planning because of the wilderness issues raised; and then, in the recent Forest Plan, the Cranberry Expansion was formally recommended by the Forest Service for Wilderness designation.

There may have been additional things to influence their recommendation. The elevation of the central ridge in the Cranberry Expansion is over 4000 feet and was originally dominated by red spruce forest, which the Forest Service has been actively working to regenerate. During the 1995 field trip we learned that the discovery of threatened and endangered species would change the location of a proposed road and

cause logging in the area to be cancelled. Studies on the location of northern flying squirrels would continue, and the presence of goshawk nests indicated that they were returning. With this uncertainty about where a road could be built, and the fact that the Little Fork area is at "the end of the road" because it is next to the Cranberry Wilderness, the investment of miles of new road might not make financial or ecological sense.

The Cranberry Expansion is not a showy attraction for tourist consumption. There are no spectacular views or thunderous waterfalls. It is a place of deep cove forest folded with mountain streams. It is so shady that the automatic flash goes off when you try to take a picture. It is so moist that even on a sunny summer day your rear gets wet if you sit on the ground.

It is a place of abiding peace and quiet, of psychic renewal for humans, but mostly, a place of trees that will only become more magnificent with time.'