

**Written Testimony of Gil Willis, Owner and Operator of the Elk River  
Touring Center/Elk River Inn and Restaurant to the House Natural  
Resources Committee Hearing on  
H.R. 5151 The Wild Monongahela Act  
Tuesday, February 26<sup>th</sup> 2008**

**Intro:**

I would like to thank Subcommittee Chairman Grijalva and my Congressman, Nick Rahall and members of the committee for allowing me to speak today in support for the Wild Monongahela Act. This is **an** historic piece of legislation that will help **insure** the future of West Virginia's greatest natural treasure – our National Forest.

Let me begin my comments by commending Congressman Rahall and the entire West Virginia congressional delegation for their commitment to working and listening to the people of West Virginia. This bill truly reflects the thoughts and concerns of residents of the Mountain State who appreciate our national forests and the wild areas that are included in those lands. Our Congressional team has developed a proposal that protects our forest and meets the needs of the forest's many users.

I especially appreciated the open process that Congressman Rahall has had and the entire delegation's willingness to meet with **me** and other concerned West Virginians and their desire to work with all of us to develop a proposal that truly represents West Virginians and will ensure the future of our state's forests for generations to come.

**Recreation/Business:**

As a member of the West Virginia business community whose business is dependant on our state's wild and wonderful landscape, I am very supportive of efforts to ensure the wild future of our forests... My wife and I own and operate Elk River Inn, Restaurant & Touring Center, which is open year round as a skiing, fly fishing, cycling and hiking resort. We have been at the forefront of the outdoor industry since its infancy in West Virginia for over 30 years. Our company currently employees over 20 full and part time staff. I also for the last 15 years have sat on the Pocahontas County Convention and Visitors Bureau Board of Directors. Our remote mountain setting in Pocahontas County relies on quality wild outdoors places. All of the counties which the new wilderness areas are located in will benefit both socially and economically from this bill and the high quality of the visitors that they will attract. West Virginia's mountain region is "the last best place" in the mid Atlantic. This of course is a marketing term which hits close to the heart.

Wilderness designation for these areas included in the Wild Monongahela Act will provide unparalleled primitive and traditional outdoor recreation opportunities,

such as hunting, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, camping, backcountry skiing and snowshoeing and much more. These areas and the activities not only keep us competitive in regional and national markets but also provide a much-needed and affordable outdoor experience for our local residents.

### **Environmental/future generations:**

Protecting our rivers and our forests with wilderness designation is an investment in West Virginia's future. The state's abundance of God-given natural resources have been providing coal, natural gas, wood products and chemical ingredients to the nation and world for almost 200 years. Our economic landscape has changed, and our natural resources will not last forever. The northern mountains which fall into and border of the Monongahelia National forest are very important to our future as a region. We have a real connection to our mountains and forests and have a responsibility to leave these special places as a clean and pristine environment to our children and our children's children.

Pocahontas County is referred to as the "Birthplace of Rivers". Much of the clean water for the Mid-Atlantic originates from our county. This renewable resource cannot be taken for granted. I would like to see in the future even more federal protection for our valuable and vanishing clean water resources in the great state of West Virginia which affects the whole mid- Atlantic region's future and health.

### **Specific places included in the bill**

**Cranberry Expansion – connected ecologically and recreationally to the existing wilderness with a network of hiking trails that feed into it. It also would protect the scenic backdrop for the world class fly fishing along the Cranberry River that borders the area.**

**The Big Draft Area – would protect wilderness in the iconic Greenbrier River Valley, where none exists currently. Big Draft is home to excellent trout and bass fishing as well as an excellent whitewater run that would be our state's first whitewater trip in a designated wilderness**

**The Spice Run Area – a place containing deep dark forest and wonderful mystique. One of the wildest places in our wild and wonderful state that has been a prime spot for hunting and native brook trout angling.**

**Areas left out of the proposal – we'll have to see what the situation is with this**

While I whole heartedly support the Wild Monongahela Act I am concerned about a number of special areas that are not included in the legislation. Specifically, I would like to see the delegation amend this legislation to include Seneca Creek, Roaring Plains and East Fork of the Greenbrier. Like the others special places included in the legislation, these areas represent some of the last, truly wild places in the east and they deserve protection. As I have mentioned I am deeply concerned about our states water quality and Seneca Creek and East Fork of the Greenbrier River.

**Conclusion:**

Chairman Grijalva and members of the subcommittee, thank you once again for allowing me to voice my support for this historic legislation. West Virginian's have a strong connection and desire for protecting our one of a kind forests and this legislation goes a long way towards helping us live up to this responsibility.

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