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ALERT CENTERPIECE

STEPPIN' OUTSIDE

Steppin’ Outside: Speak up now for your public lands

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By NANCY SORRELL
Sep 2, 2026

The view from the top of Big Schloss in the George Washington National Forest in Shenandoah County on the border

On Aug. 17, I was pondering the potential subject of my monthly Steppin’ Outside column. The next day, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (which oversees our U.S. National Forests) announced that it was proposing to eliminate a hugely popular forest protection in place since 2001 known as “The Roadless Rule” that prohibits both NEW road construction and clear-cut industrial logging on 58.5 million acres of U.S. National Forest lands.

Not only was my column topic now laid out before me, but I knew without a doubt that this could be my most important “Steppin’ Outside” yet. (No pressure!) Why? Because most of the places that I have written about and have encouraged you to explore would be severely

and negatively impacted if this proposal goes into effect. If you enjoy hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, mountain biking, wildlife watching, or just being in the national forest, you need to speak up now (don't worry, I will not end this column without showing you how to be heard).

But even if you don't care that the 394,000 acres of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forest in Virginia that quite literally constitute our collective back (or front) yards and are the largest roadless area with the darkest skies east of the Mississippi, you should be worried. Why? Because you drink water and you believe in strong local economies, both of which for those of us in Rockingham, Page, Shenandoah, Highland and Augusta, are inextricably linked to the health of our national forest, which is, in turn, inextricably linked to the success of the Roadless Rule.

To be clear, the Roadless Rule does not create "de facto wilderness," nor does it remove roads, stop logging, inhibit firefighting, or prohibit anything currently allowed in the National Forest…it simply protects some of the undeveloped portions from NEW development and massive timber deforestation that would cause soil erosion and habitat destruction. Our local governments have long understood the importance of this. Years ago, the cities of Harrisonburg and Staunton deliberately located their municipal water supplies in the national forest to protect them from contamination. The same protections are afforded to thousands of other Valley residents whose wells and springs come from within the national forest, and that is also why nearly every local city, town, and county government has gone on record at one time or another in support of the water protections provided by the national forest.

There's also a strong economic reason to oppose lifting the roadless rule and opening up our national forest to industrial logging and road development. It's just bad for the local economy. Everyone knows that recreating in the national forest means stopping at the local mom-and-pop shop to grab a sandwich, bait, or ice, or to gas up your vehicle. Outdoor recreation puts money in the local coffers, and that's a really good thing. Nobody's going to visit the national forest if they have to compete with giant logging trucks, if the wildlife has disappeared, or if the streams have lost all their fish.

And don't be swayed by the false arguments of those who are pushing the Roadless Rule removal for "firefighting protection." Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is that humans cause 85% of forest fires and start within half a mile of a road. More roads mean more fires. Period.

The Forest Service already has 370,000 miles of roads and a $10.8 billion backlog of maintenance needs on them. Currently, poorly maintained roads cause water contamination and flooding hazards. Instead of building new roads, let's consider getting our current house to protect what we have. The Roadless Rule says no NEW roads, but roads already exist in and around roadless areas and must be maintained for the health of the entire forest. That's where money should go.

For hunters, anglers, and wildlife watchers, the chance of encountering abundant flora and fauna in the national forest areas where the habitat has been protected since the 2001 Roadless Rule is exponentially higher than in other parts of the forest. I'll bet that many long-time visitors to the national forest in our local Valley counties have already made such an observation on their own, and perhaps they didn't even know they were in a Roadless Area. If you were on the tens of thousands of acres around Elliott Knob, Crawford Mountain, Little River, Dry River, Skidmore, Massanutten, Big Schloss, or Laurel Fork, you can perhaps appreciate what I am saying because you were in a Roadless Area.

There is one more reason to speak up in support of keeping the Roadless Rule intact. Democracy. The U.S. National Forest is about as "we the people" as it gets, and here in the Valley it is also about as local as it gets. Although the Roadless Rule was put into place in 2001, the national initiative was actually launched in 1999 from atop Reddish Knob, a magnificent mountaintop on the Augusta County-Pendleton County (W.Va.) border just a short distance south of Rockingham. A narrow paved road to the top provides a 360-degree view of our valleys, mountains, watersheds, and numerous tracts of U.S. National Forest Roadless Areas that swaddle us in beauty and protection.

Five minutes atop Reddish Knob on a clear day brings it all into focus. What we collectively have with our public lands and what we could, in the blink of an eye, lose forever is made perfectly understandable from the top of this mountain. Still, you don't have to go to the mountaintop to get this commonsense, non-partisan message. In Virginia, the Roadless Rule protects 394,000 acres and 545 miles of rivers. Nationally, the rule protects 44.7 million acres and clean drinking water for 60 million people, safeguards 43,000 miles of trails, and provides 6.5 million jobs in outdoor recreation (worth $730 billion).

And the really cool thing is that these are OUR lands. Most people don't own a forest or a stream, but we all own these lands. These aren't the muckety-muck lord's lands or the almighty king's lands. You won't find "No Trespassing" signs nailed to these trees or fences keeping you out.

In 1999, after the Roadless Rule concept was announced at Reddish Knob, the idea went before the public in more than 600 public hearings across the country. The "people" turned out in droves and made it clear in more than 1.6 million public comments that they liked the idea, and the idea went into effect in 2001. The 1.6 million comments represented the greatest feedback in history regarding a National Forest Service Rule.

Now the people need to speak up again, preferably in larger numbers than before. Tell the Forest Service that you, as a landowner, wish to keep the Roadless Rule in place to protect the national forest lands from destructive development. The good news is that it is easier than ever to send your comments in with just a click on your phone or computer.

Speak from the heart. Just say that you don't want your land chopped up and sold to the highest bidder or ruined for the next generation.

Feel free to pull from any or all of the reasons I have listed, or add more of your own. But do so now — you only have until Sept. 21 — and encourage everyone you know to add their voices as well. Remember this is your land and remember also that democracy is not a spectator sport!

Here's the link directly to the page for submitting comments: regulations.gov.

Nancy Sorrells is an award-winning freelance writer who has been weaving words together for stories focusing on the great outdoors, human interest, and history since the 1970s. She and her husband share a household with two dogs and a cat and whatever other critter decides to take up residence on their few acres of land in southern Augusta County. Since March of 2020, she and a retired friend have tried to go for a weekly walk in the woods. If you have ideas about outdoor spaces and places that should be explored, email her at lotswife1959@gmail.com.

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Upcoming Events

• March 20, 7-8 p.m. Hotel Madison lobby (Quills Lobby Bar, 710 S. Main St., Harrisonburg) Interview, sample reading, book sales and signings.