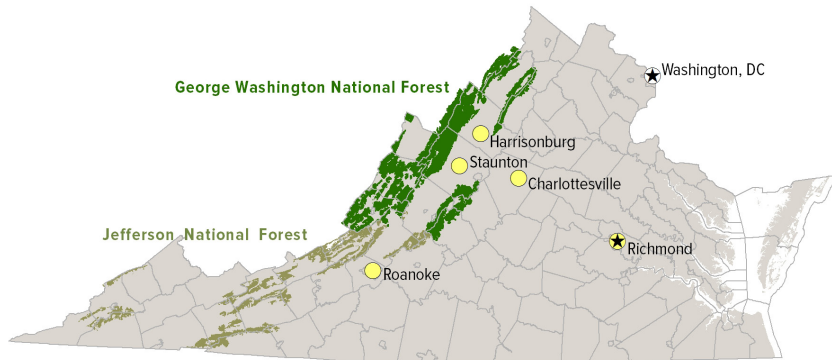


FRACKING IN THE George Washington National Forest



As the largest national forest in the East, the George Washington National Forest (GW) plays a special environmental, economic, and recreational role for our region. Yet the U.S. Forest Service is weighing whether to open up the forest to horizontal natural gas drilling and the riskiest and most destructive form of fracking.

One of the country's most popular national forests, the GW is absolutely the wrong place for this.

The Threat

In the spring of 2013, the U.S. Forest Service is expected to release the final new management plan for the GW, which will guide all activity in the over one million-acre forest for the next decade or longer. The Forest Service originally proposed to prohibit horizontal gas drilling on any future federal oil and gas leases in the GW, but due to pressure from the gas industry and other drilling proponents, the Forest Service has been reconsidering.

Prohibiting horizontal drilling in the GW would curb high-volume hydraulic fracturing—fracking—used to extract natural gas from shale deposits. This risky form of drilling could endanger public water supplies, the forest's fish and wildlife habitat, and the recreation opportunities in the GW.

Preserving Our Water Supply

The GW plays an important role in providing water for much of our region as it is located entirely within the watershed of the James and Potomac Rivers, which supply drinking water to Richmond, VA and Washington, D.C., and ultimately flow into the Chesapeake Bay. It is a direct source of drinking water for over 262,000 people in local communities in and around Virginia's historic Shenandoah Valley.¹ Further downstream more than 4.5 million people in northern Virginia, the Washington, D.C. metro area, and Richmond rely on the forest to protect many headwaters of a safe, high-quality drinking water supply.² Given the significant possibility of water contamination from fracking and the risk to local and regional water supplies, prohibiting horizontal drilling is a sensible approach for the GW.

Protecting Our Public Lands

The GW is a recreational forest—it hosts more than one million visitors each year³ who enjoy hunting, trout fishing, hiking, camping, mountain biking, bird watching, and more in this unique and special area. The GW's forests and watersheds are

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perhaps more intact than any other national forest in the eastern U.S. Currently there is no gas drilling in the GW and there never have been gas wells in the forest. As a popular tourist destination, the GW also plays a significant economic role for the region. Outdoor recreation is big business in Virginia, annually generating about \$13.6 billion in consumer spending and \$923 million in state and local tax revenue and directly supporting about 138,000 Virginia jobs.⁴ The GW and other public national forest lands provide key opportunities for these activities. Turning public lands over for a large-scale industrial activity such as fracking jeopardizes the economic benefits and recreational enjoyment the GW provides.

Sustaining Our Farmlands

The forests of the GW are the backdrop to many nearby farms and rural communities. Gas development with its drilling, access roads for hundreds of trucks, and construction of pipelines and other gas-related facilities would have major impacts on neighboring farms and towns. Farming, which depends on clean water and air, is the economic backbone of the Shenandoah Valley in particular, where Augusta, Rockingham, and Shenandoah Counties are among the top farming counties in the state.⁵

A Common Sense Approach

The Forest Service's proposed plan to prohibit horizontal gas drilling on GW lands is a sensible approach that is not overly limiting. The plan would be reassessed in the next 10 to 15 years and of course it would not affect development on private land.

Standing in Support of the GW

Ten local governments surrounding the GW, including the cities of Harrisonburg, Lynchburg, Roanoke, and Staunton, and the counties of Augusta, Bath, Botetourt, Rockbridge, Rockingham, and Shenandoah, have submitted comments expressing concerns over fracking or horizontal drilling in the GW. Additionally, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the National Park Service, and two major metropolitan water suppliers—the Fairfax County Water Authority and the Army Corps of Engineers' Washington Aqueduct, which supplies Washington, D.C. and Arlington County and Falls Church, VA—have filed comments supporting the Forest Service's proposed prohibition.

Bipartisan public support has been strongly in favor of not opening up the GW to horizontal drilling: of the more than 53,000 comments submitted during the comment period on the Forest Service's draft plan, more than 95 percent supported the proposed restrictions.⁶



¹ Wild Virginia, *The State of Our Water*, at 3 (2008), available at <http://wildvirginia.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/state-of-our-water-full-report.pdf>.

² Amy Mall, NRDC, "Drinking water for millions—including D.C.—at risk without stronger BLM fracking rules," (Nov. 28, 2012), available at http://switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/amall/drinking_water_for_millions_.html.

³ U.S. Forest Service, *Draft EIS for Revised GWNF Forest Plan*, at 3-199 (2011), available at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/gwj/home/?cid=stelprdb5295538>.

⁴ Outdoor Industry Association, *The Outdoor Recreation Economy: Virginia Report*, available at <http://www.outdoorindustry.org/advocacy/recreation/resources.php>.

⁵ USDA, *Census of Agriculture, County Profiles (2007)*, available at http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Online_Highlights/County_Profiles/Virginia.

⁶ Shenandoah Valley Network, *Public and Local Government Comment Analysis (2012)*, available at <http://www.svna.org/ass/library/10/svn-gwnf-comment-analysis-2012.pdf>.

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