

Age of trees in George Washington National Forest's key issue in management proposal

Written by

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STAUNTON — Some of the oldest woods in America are in Augusta County, and behind the debate over a proposed federal plan for managing them is a rarely asked question: How old is too old?

The U.S. Forest Service's proposed management plan for the George Washington National Forest, the federally managed, 1-million-acre swathe of Virginia's mountains that includes 29 percent of Augusta County, raises exactly that question in setting new guidelines for logging.

The plan, which cost about \$1 million to draft and will guide the forest's management for at least a decade, is nearly finalized. Consensus about it is still a ways off.

"We would prefer the plan call for no new logging or new access roads," said David Hannah, conservation director of Wild Virginia, a nonprofit environmental group.

Others argue that could result in a forest that's aging, but not too gracefully. Because of large-scale logging 100 years ago, large stretches of the forest were planted at the same time and are now nearing their life expectancy. An estimated 88 percent of the forest is more than 70 years old. Nearly half the forest, 48 percent, is 100 years old or older.

"Trees get old and die too. We need young trees to keep the forest productive," said Al Bourgeois, an advocate for increased logging in the forest and a wildlife biologist with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

"Many species depend on younger trees, and a lot of those species are in serious decline. I want to see a mix of habitats (in the forest)."

Blueberries, blackberries, pokeberry, and many nut-bearing trees like Allegheny chinquapin and hickory do better in cleared areas where they receive more sunlight. Young oak trees, too, do better in direct sunlight. These plants are an important food source to animals from grouse to bears. If reseeded, logged areas grow back a thick vegetative cover that provides game animals like turkey shelter and an ideal place to hunt grasshoppers and other insects to eat.

"It's imperative that we have herbaceous openings on the forest floor," said Patrick McCurdy, a regional biologist with the National Wild Turkey Federation. "(Logging) makes the creation of wildlife openings more feasible."

But there are tradeoffs, opponents to expanding logging say.

"There are some animals that don't do well in young forest," said Hannah, at Wild Virginia.

"Woodpeckers, chickadees, owls, hawks and even flying squirrels use the cavities that old trees provide. When these trees die and fall to the ground, they make good habitat for salamanders, snakes, shrews, insects, fungi or lichen."

Wild Virginia and other conservation groups like Virginia Forest Watch and the Sierra Club prefer that logging be done only on sites recently logged, if at all, so as not to disturb the old growth forest with heavy machinery and the building of new access roads.

There are 1,800 miles of roads in the forest, and there are concerns about how the roads affect

smaller animals.

"Logging reduces the number of salamanders you find in an area by about one half," said David Marsh, a Washington and Lee University biology professor who has published several studies that looked at the effects of roads on salamanders in the national forest.

"Clear-cutting (a type of logging in which tree stumps are removed and entire areas are cleared) reduces them by about two-thirds," he said.

But Marsh also found that, as long as the forest is allowed to regenerate, the salamander populations rebound. He found salamanders were more willing than expected to cross access roads, easing concerns that roadways fragment salamander populations and lead to populations with less genetic diversity.

"With roads, the biggest concern is traffic," Marsh said. "Typically, you don't have much traffic on these roads at night when the salamanders are most active."

Younger swaths of forest can also be created by controlled burnings, but the effect of those burnings on wildlife has not been thoroughly studied.

And logging, unlike burning, brings money into the forest service.

Under the current plan, the forest allows logging of up to 2,400 acres of the forest per year. Over the last few years, however, only 800-900 acres a year have been logged.

"(The shortfall) is mainly due to funding," said Karen Overcash of the U.S. Forest Service, who said the department has to pay for environmental impact surveys, marking and inventorying trees and monitoring logging to ensure it's done in a way that best benefits the forest. "We harvest as much timber as (Congress) gives us the money for."

Even logging only a third of what the plan calls for, the Forest Service brought in \$886,000 in revenue in 2010 from timber sales from the national forest. Of that, \$794,000 went back to the Forest Service for forest management, and the rest went into the U.S. Treasury.

Local governments no longer receive direct revenue from timber sales, but many wonder if logging could provide a boost to the local economy.

Wood prices have fallen as the housing sector of the economy has stagnated, but hardwood exports still accounted for \$2.7 billion of U.S. exports in 2007, with 55 percent of the hardwood production coming from the eastern U.S.

"If the (Forest Service) increased the amount of timber for sale the interest in buying it is there," said Kenny Wilkinson, a lumber inspector for Blue Ridge Lumber, which purchases hardwood from the national forest. "There's a lot of quality timber in the national forest and it's a renewable resource that can help create jobs, (but) they don't want to sell it."

The industry has changed dramatically over the past few decades, said Wilkinson. Replanting cleared sites and access roads, using buffers to reduce erosion, using portable bridges to cross creeks rather than disturbing water flow and leaving stumps so that trees can regenerate with an already established root system are all now common practices.

"We're a private industry, but we're interested in good management practices," Wilkinson said. "Because in the long run it makes the forest more healthy."

The management plan being considered does call for an increase in harvestable timber acres, 3,000 acres up from 2,400 acres, but it is unclear if the Forest Service would have the resources to meet that goal.

If logging doesn't increase, some wildlife experts fear we are reaching a tipping point with some of our game animals.

"No (logging) at all is not good for the forest, and it's not good for wildlife," said Bourgeois, noting that nearly half, 44 percent of the forest, is permanently off-limits to logging because of its designation as a wilderness area or other special land use. "That's why we have deer coming down into people's yards looking for food. We do need some mature forest, but we need a balance and that is not happening in the George Washington."

It's also unclear if the plan will be amended again. The Forest Service is seeking public comment until Oct. 17.

"We will review and respond to all comments and assess what we need to change," said, Ken Langraf, planning staff officer for the Forest Service. "We'll make those changes and then finalize our forest plan."

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