

# A TREASURED PLACE AT RISK: The George Washington National Forest

## The Threat of Fracking

The George Washington National Forest (GW) is a treasured part of our region that protects our water supplies, supports our economy, and offers abundant opportunities for outdoor recreation. Yet the U.S. Forest Service is weighing whether to open up this special forest to industrial gas development and fracking. One of the country's most popular national forests, the GW is absolutely the wrong place for this.

In 2014, the Forest Service is expected to release the final management plan for the GW, which will guide all activity in the over one million-acre forest for the next decade or longer. Due to pressure from the gas industry and other drilling proponents, the Forest Service is considering opening up the forest to gas drilling and fracking (high-volume hydraulic fracturing used to extract natural gas from shale deposits) and all the associated impacts.

Currently there is no gas drilling in the GW and there never has been. There is broad public support for protecting the GW from this industrial activity, which would endanger recreation and tourism opportunities, the safety of public water supplies, the strength of the local economy, the rural character of the region, and the health of fish and wildlife habitat.

## Protecting a Beloved Place

The GW draws more than one million visitors each year<sup>1</sup> who enjoy trout fishing, hunting, hiking, camping, mountain biking, bird watching, and more in this unique and special area. While the GW is the largest, most intact national forest in the East, its scenic vistas, world-class trout streams, remote wildlife habitats, and exceptional outdoor recreation opportunities are readily available to the approximately 10 million people who live within a couple hours' drive. Turning these public lands over for large-scale industrial gas development would jeopardize this forest that so many enjoy.

## Safeguarding Our Water Supply

The GW plays an important role in providing clean drinking water for much of our region. Its streams and rivers are a direct source of drinking water for over 329,000 people in local communities in and around Virginia's Shenandoah Valley.<sup>2</sup> The forest also protects many headwaters of the James River and the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers, which ultimately supply drinking water for more than 4.5 million people downstream in Richmond, northern Virginia, and the Washington, D.C., metro area.<sup>3</sup> Protecting the GW from gas drilling and fracking would prevent potential contamination of water supplies.

## Sustaining a Healthy Economy

As a popular destination, the GW 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 approximately 138,000 jobs.<sup>4</sup>



*(Over, please)*

The forests of the GW are also the backdrop to many nearby farms and rural communities. Agriculture is Virginia's largest industry, and the GW region provides more than two-thirds of the Commonwealth's agricultural production revenue.<sup>5</sup> For generations, farming has been the economic backbone of the Shenandoah Valley, and Augusta, Rockingham, and Shenandoah Counties are among the top farming counties in the state.<sup>6</sup>

Gas development has a big industrial footprint, requiring land clearing for drilling rigs and wastewater pits, access roads for hundreds of trucks, and construction of pipelines, compressor stations, and other gas-related facilities. The continued success of the region's agriculture and tourism depends on maintaining intact farm and forest lands, as well as clean air, water, and soil that are free of pollution from fracking chemicals, gas leaks, drilling waste, and muddy runoff.

## Preserving Quality of Life

The quality of life in the GW region is ranked among the highest in the state because of the access to forests, scenic beauty, recreational experiences, and a healthy environment. The industrial impacts of gas development would damage the region's rural character and way of life. For generations, local communities in the historic Shenandoah Valley and surrounding mountains have been good stewards of the land and built an economy based on complementary agriculture, forestry, tourism, recreation, and business. Bringing gas development to the GW is not consistent with this vision.

## Standing in Support of the GW

In its 2011 draft management plan, the Forest Service proposed to prohibit horizontal gas drilling on any future federal gas leases in the GW. This would avoid the most damaging impacts of shale gas drilling and high-volume fracking.

Nonpartisan public support has been strongly in favor of protecting the GW. Eleven local governments surrounding the GW, including the cities of Harrisonburg, Lynchburg, Roanoke, and Staunton, and the counties of Augusta, Bath, Botetourt, Highland, Rockbridge, Rockingham, and Shenandoah, have supported a ban or moratorium on fracking or horizontal drilling in the GW.

The proposed ban also has been supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the National Park Service, three major metropolitan water suppliers—DC Water, the Washington Aqueduct, and the Fairfax County Water Authority—and by Washington, D.C.; Arlington County; Falls Church; and the Mayor of Alexandria, Va.

Since 2011, over 75,000 public comments have been submitted supporting the proposed restrictions. U.S. Senators Warner and Kaine and Governor McAuliffe have urged the Forest Service to listen to the united voice of Virginians.<sup>7</sup> These citizens, elected officials, and agencies stand in support of protecting the GW and await the Forest Service's decision on the final management plan.

Go to [ProtectTheGW.org](http://ProtectTheGW.org) to take action and learn more.

<sup>1</sup> USFS, Draft EIS for Revd. GWNF Forest Plan, at 3-199 (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Wild Virginia, *The State of Our Water*, at 3 (2008); EPA's Safe Drinking Water Information System (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Amy Mall, NRDC, "Drinking water for millions—including D.C.—at risk without stronger BLM fracking rules," (Nov. 28, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Outdoor Industry Association, *The Outdoor Recreation Economy: Va. Report*.

<sup>5</sup> US Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis (2014) and Headwaters Economics (2014).

<sup>6</sup> USDA, *Census of Agriculture, County Profiles* (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Comment numbers and letters compiled by Shenandoah Valley Network.

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