

News From _____

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Byrd, Rockefeller Introduce West Virginia Wilderness Bill
*Legislation would designate additional areas for wilderness protection,
help advance ecotourism*

Washington, D.C. . U.S. Senators Robert C. Byrd and Jay Rockefeller, both D-W.Va., have introduced legislation that would designate additional areas for wilderness protection in the Monongahela National Forest. Earlier this week, the same bill was introduced in the House of Representatives. The "Wild Monongahela: A National Legacy for West Virginia's Special Places" has received wide support in West Virginia and will be a boost to the Mountain State's thriving ecotourism industry.

The legislation would designate seven additional areas in the Monongahela Forest for wilderness protection out of the eighteen roadless areas evaluated by the U.S. Forest Service. The new areas that would receive wilderness protection include Big Draft, Cheat Mountain, Roaring Plains West, and Spice Run. The existing areas that would be expanded include Otter Creek, Dolly Sods, and Cranberry. Currently, the five areas cover more than 78,000 acres of roadless lands. This legislation would give an additional 47,000 acres wilderness protection.

"One of the most important sectors for economic development in West Virginia is environmental tourism. Our "Wild and Wonderful" slogan aptly describes the beautiful vistas, flower covered valleys, free flowing streams and rivers, and impressive sandstone formations, that can be found in the Monongahela National Forest," Byrd said. "Inclusion of these sites in and nearby federally protected wilderness areas puts them "on the map" for those seeking an adventure in nature. Attracting these visitors is one of the keys to future economic growth in West Virginia."

"The absolute importance of this legislation is easy to see if you've ever visited one of these sites. Just ask anyone who has hiked through Dolly Sods when the blueberry bushes are in bloom, or someone who has rested near one of Spice Run's clear streams," Rockefeller said. "These are Mountain State treasures that deserve our protection."

The Senators have long supported efforts to provide permanent protections for our most treasured lands. Senator Byrd voted for the original Wilderness Act in 1964 that resulted in the protection of nine million acres of roadless land. Now the Wilderness Act has grown to cover 106 million acres in forty-four states.

The 1964 Wilderness Act also established the National Wilderness Preservation System that allows Congress to designate federal lands as part of the national system. It has been over 25 years since the last federal designation in West Virginia. While the proposed legislation would add a significant amount of land to those areas protected as wilderness, the vast majority of the Monongahela National Forest will continue to be available for the multiple uses envisioned when the National Forest System was first created. These include timber harvesting operations, wildlife and fish management, and recreation.

“It is my hope that after much thought and reflection all West Virginians will see this proposal as a straightforward effort to reach a bipartisan compromise that has a real chance to become reality. The result will be that future generations of West Virginians and all Americans will be able to enjoy the benefits of God’s creation,” Byrd added.

“West Virginia’s natural beauty is incomparable, and our outdoor tourism industry is invaluable to our economy,” Rockefeller added. “By designating as wilderness more of the breathtaking areas found in the Monongahela National Forest, we’re not only preserving their beauty for future generations, but we’re also making a sound investment in our state’s continued economic growth.”

Since the Forest Service released its new Forest Management plan for the Monongahela National Forest in September 2006, Senators Byrd and Rockefeller have heard from constituents who advocated an expansion of wilderness areas in West Virginia. The Senators are committed to working with the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee to ensure that this measure is passed and signed into law this year.

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