



January 18, 2014

Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
USDA
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington DC 20250

Re: George Washington Forest Plan Revision – Opposed to Hydrofracking

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Please consider the following comments on the George Washington National Forest's Revised Land and Resource Management Plan and on the Draft Revised Plan, on behalf of the Friends of Middle River, Augusta County, Virginia. We are a citizen organization of folks concerned about the health and future of the Middle River. We promote clean water and improved health of the aquatic ecosystem resources in the Shenandoah Valley, which also helps to restore the larger Potomac River watershed. Our members live, work and play on the river, and we care deeply about its future. People in our community depend upon ground water wells and above ground reservoirs for our drinking water.

We have joined the widespread local opposition to horizontal hydrofracking in the George Washington National Forest, and add our support for the position taken by the elected officials in the cities of Harrisonburg, Lynchburg, Roanoke, and Staunton, and the counties of Augusta, Bath, Botetourt, Rockbridge, Rockingham, and Shenandoah asking the Forest Service to prohibit or place a moratorium on horizontal drilling to protect public drinking water and rural lands. We are convinced, as are many other local citizens and conservation organizations, that the proposed high-volume hydrofracking should be prohibited until its impacts on our water resources are well understood and strict, enforceable controls are in place.

We are motivated to speak out on this issue at this time because we have been following the daily news reporting on the impact of an industrial chemical leak into a river that shut down the city water supply in Charleston, WV. As a result of the spill, schools were shut down, and about 300,000 residents were told not to drink their tap water, shower or wash clothes in the contaminated water. This emergency was prolonged in part because public officials did not know the health hazard of the chemical involved.

The information on the web about the pros and cons of hydrofracking, including comments made by the Southern Environmental Law Center, raise this same type of concern about the possible accidental contamination of groundwater supplies and drinking water wells from fracking fluid

and the multiple chemicals it contains. Many of these chemicals are known to be toxics, human carcinogens, or otherwise hazardous to human health. The Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the NF revised plan states that as much as 60 to 80 percent of fracking fluid can return to the surface, leaving 20 to 40 percent underground. These fluids may ultimately migrate into aquifers. We are also concerned about the massive amount of water and flowback waste that must be transported to and from the drilling sites through Augusta County, as well as the high level of truck traffic associated with high-volume hydrofracking that increase the chance of accidental spills. Another important consideration is that the GWNF is part of a fragile karst region. Contaminants from fracking fluids that migrate into aquifers and into streams from accidental spills in this type of geology can have wide spread, regional affects.

Our citizen group is only one of a network of watershed groups throughout the state and the country, and our concern about our water resources extends beyond our community in Augusta County. We understand that drilling in the mountain areas of the George Washington NF could require such deep wells as to make it economically infeasible. So, why are the oil and gas companies so interested in the George Washington NF? We concur with other citizen groups who believe the reason the gas and oil industry is putting a huge amount of political pressure on the USFW is that banning drilling in any national forest would set a bad precedent that could be used to support bans on other forestlands. We believe not establishing a ban in a National Forest with such a sound public health, scientific, geological and biological basis would be devastating, especially in an area with such strong public support for a ban. Such a precedent would make it impossible for the Dept. of Agriculture to ban hydrofracking in other national forests with an equal or less preponderant justification.

In conclusion, we agree with one of our members who has publicly commented that:

... (there is) no doubt that with American ingenuity we can extract natural gas without ruining our water, wildlife habitat and the lives of rural folks and their communities living next door to the industrial site. To achieve success we need four things: sound engineering, safeguards, superb construction and government oversight. This is not happening. We also need the truth. What are the corporations pumping into the Earth, and why aren't we allowed to know?

We believe the experience of the citizens in Charleston, WV, provides a clear example of the type of devastating impact that a contaminated water supply can have on a community. We don't want a forest plan in George Washington NF that opens the possibility of such a catastrophe occurring in Augusta County. We request that the forest plan includes a ban on hydrofracking as provided in the draft plan under review.

Respectfully,

Darrell Schwalm
Chairman, Public Policy Committee
Friends of Middle River
Augusta County, Virginia