

Spring Review in Canaan Valley: Board Meeting Highlights

By Hugh Rogers

Last Saturday in April, cool breeze, hot sun, smear on SPF 30, pick up bag lunch, go! Convivial groups of Highlands Conservancy members set out from our base at Timberline to explore familiar and lessknown terrain: Mt. Porte Crayon, the North Fork of the Blackwater, and the National Wildlife Refuge. That evening, even overextended, last-to-finish folks got a crack at the buffet before settling in for a series of updates.

We met Stan Skutek, the new Refuge manager, and Emily Samargo of Friends of Blackwater. Matt Keller showed and told recent developments in the wilderness campaign, including negotiations with the DNR on boundaries of proposed wilderness areas. Other issues and personalities appear in the board meeting report below.

George Constantz, ecologist, educator, and erstwhile candidate for the state senate, announced another update: his book, *Hollows, Peepers, and Highlanders: An Appalachian Mountain Ecology*, will soon appear in a second edition. George's slide presentation was interrupted by a blown bulb. Neither that nor noise from the bar next door slowed his stride. Stalking the room, interrogating the audience, George treated us to a seminar. His perspective ranged from the tiniest actors to the entire theater, and he concluded with a reiteration of four baleful threats to our mountains: forest fragmentation, lack of land use planning, acid rain, and exotic species.

Next morning, the board convened to discuss these and related issues, and the organization's wherewithal to make a difference.

Public Lands: The wilderness campaign is one of three related issues affecting the Monongahela National Forest, all coming to a head this year. The others are forest management plan revision and a threatened and endangered species (TES) amendment to the current plan. In mid-April, the supervisor signed off on the TES amendment, which will allow four long-pending timber sales. Our appeal to the regional forester will not stay those sales. All are problematic. We are considering administrative appeals.

Other issues Dave Saville has been working on are trails in the Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge, and ATV problems in the New River Gorge.

Mining: George Constantz had emphasized the insistent threat of forest fragmentation. Cindy Rank reminded us of the continuing reality of forest destruction by mountaintop removal mining (MTR). The Highlands Conservancy, usually represented by Cindy, Julian Martin, and Bob Gates, has been working with a coalition of groups on public relations and organizing against MTR.

We have administrative and judicial appeals pending at WV's Surface Mine Board and Environmental Quality Board, as well as the U.S. District Court. Some of these involve familiar issues working through new channels: acid drainage, the buffer zone around streams, and the Corps of Engineers' nationwide "don't make us look at it" permit for valley fills.

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Wind Power: We have been participating in the Public Service Commission's development of a new type of permit for wholesale generating facilities. Our particular concern is siting, with impacts to wildlife habitat, avian migration, and scenic, historic, and recreational special places.

For two already-permitted projects, both in the Mt. Storm area, whether they get built depends on renewal of the energy tax credit. That's tied up in the struggle over the Bush Administration's energy bill. Given \$17 billion in subsidies for the energy production industry, what's a few million for wind? The proposal for Rich Mountain, which the board has opposed, has not yet gone before the PSC, nor have the meteorological testing towers been installed.

Peter Shoenfeld alerted us to three proposals in the earliest stage of development. One on Gauley Mountain would use national forest land. In addition to the PSC permit process, questions of compliance with the forest management plan would have to be addressed. Forest Service rules will give us plenty of opportunity to comment on this one. Another would be on Jack Mountain in Pendleton County, southeast of North Fork Mountain. George Beetham showed us photos of the view from Spruce Knob. The board did not take a position on either of these, though there was strong sentiment against the Gauley proposal. Finally, Red Oak Knob of Allegheny Mountain, on the WV-VA border, is being tested for another wind farm. Because of its elevation it would be visible from many special places in the Mon and George Washington National Forests.

Corridor H: Predictably, the town councils of Thomas and Davis did not agree on a new alignment that would avoid Blackwater Canyon. WVDOT wants to go back to the original alignment. That would trigger another lawsuit, based on impacts to historic sites near the head of the canyon. Farther east, near the town of Wardensville, the current highway, WV 55, gets the all-or-nothing treatment. Our state DOH is allowing the pavement to disintegrate, so commuters who want decent access to Virginia and I-81 will be moved to agitate for the four-lane. Under the court-approved settlement agreement, no Corridor H construction would commence for twenty years unless the existing road's level of service declined beyond a certain point. WVHC operations, and a request for feedback: The hot forest issues are bringing in more new members. Our treasurer projected a deficit budget for 2004, but the first quarter wound up in the black. Look for a report in the Voice on Dave Saville's grant for red spruce ecosystem restoration. Speaking of the Voice, our esteemed editor's tenure has reached two years, a milestone we applauded.

The board would appreciate hearing members' opinions on two matters. First, the Hiking Guide is due for a new edition, and perhaps for alternative formats. If you have ideas and preferences about shape and content, continually updatable CD's, maps in pockets or in downloadable form, or other changes in the Guide, please let us know. You can contact Frank Young at his addresses on the roster. Thanks to Jim Solley for his work on maps.

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Second, the outings schedule for the summer is complete. Where else besides the Voice should we advertise it? If you have ideas on reaching people who would want to participate, contact Jonathan Jessup, also on the roster.

To go back to the beginning, that is, Friday night of Spring Review weekend, Jonathan's slide show (with music!) inspired us—those images remain alongside the darker facts of forest fragmentation, acid rain, exotic species, and other threats, and will encourage us to keep working.