

## **Monongahela National Forest DRAFT Niche Statement**

The mountains of West Virginia hold a special place in the hearts of their people.

American Indians lived here thousands of years, at first hunting and gathering and then later in agricultural-based villages. Three hundred years ago, these mountains represented the first American frontier to European settlers eager for a fresh start in a new land. These mountains and their resources provided the lumber and coal to house and fuel a growing nation exploding with immigration and opportunity.

However, logging methods used during the late 1800s left these mountains covered with bare slopes and flammable slash. Wildfires burned uncontrollably across these lands and sometimes into uncut forests. In the early 1900s, the barren West Virginia hillsides could no longer stop rainwater from gushing down the mountains, swelling creeks and streams and causing disastrous floods in communities as far away as Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

In 1915, the Federal Government began to purchase these cutover lands with the intent of reforesting them to prevent floods. When the Monongahela National Forest was created by Congress 1920, nearly all of it was devoid of forest. Since then, time and active resource management, such as tree planting and fire protection, have helped the land to recover. This past shapes the future of the Forest.

Now the Monongahela encompasses more than 910,000 acres of federal ownership in 10 counties of the Potomac Highlands region of West Virginia. It is the fourth largest National Forest in the 20 northeastern states and the largest expanse of public land in the State. Located in proximity to major population centers of the region, including Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh, the Forest has been called a "special place" by those familiar with its many attributes. Despite being heavily affected by humans over the last two hundred years, the Forest retains a sense of remoteness and solitude. Rugged topography, fast-moving mountain streams, and small communities interspersed with pastoral farmland combine to create a sense of stepping back in time.

Due in large part to its geographic location in the mid-Atlantic and its mountainous terrain, the Monongahela National Forest is one of the most ecologically diverse forests in the National Forest System. As prevailing weather patterns approach from the west, clouds are lifted up across the Forest and over the Allegheny Front of the Appalachian Mountains. As a result, the west side of the Forest receives approximately 60" of precipitation annually, while the east side, in the "rain shadow" of the mountains receives only half that amount. This contributes to the mosaic of plant and animal communities within

the Forest. Containing only about 6 percent of the land in West Virginia, the Monongahela is home to 13 percent of the rare plant and animal species in the State.

The Forest contains the northern-most populations of certain southern species, and the southern-most populations of certain northern species. The highest elevations in the "Mountain State" are within in the Monongahela, including Spruce Knob, the highest point at 4,863 feet above sea level. Soils with frigid temperature regimes, stands of red spruce and populations of snowshoe hare, all characteristic of boreal forests, occur across the Forest at higher elevations. Lower elevations contain coves with rich deep soils typical of the southern Appalachians; stands of mixed northern hardwoods typical of the northern Appalachians; and dry site stands of oaks and white pines. Prickly pear cactus plants even grow on the eastern slopes of the Forest, along with other shale barren species.

Many of the 75+ species of trees found in the Monongahela are extremely valuable for commercial wood products as well as wildlife habitat. Particularly valuable are black cherry, and white and red oak. Much of the Forest is contiguously forested, containing 70-100 year-old stands that provide habitat for interior dwelling species.

The unique geology of the Forest provides the setting for approximately 40-50 natural gas wells, which are a regionally important and a valuable natural gas resource. It is expected that future leasing and development on the Forest will provide opportunities for discovering and producing natural gas for public use. In addition, a natural gas storage field is located on the Forest which serves an important role in making sufficient quantities of natural gas readily available to eastern U.S. population centers in times of high demand.

The steep slopes of the Monongahela give rise to 500 miles of trout streams that later become the Tygarts Valley, Potomac, Cheat, Greenbrier, Elk, and Gauley Rivers. With the headwaters of 6 major river systems within the Forest boundary, water is an important Forest resource. More than 90% of the high quality trout waters in West Virginia are within the Forest boundary.

The Forest receives some of the highest acid deposition rates in the country because of its location downwind from the Ohio River Valley. This causes management concerns relating to loss of aquatic species from stream acidification and concerns relating to changes in soil chemistry, which could impact the productivity of Forest soils.

The Monongahela contains approximately 52 percent of the publicly available recreation land in West Virginia and draws users from local areas, across the State, and surrounding States. Recreation opportunities range from hiking on approximately 800 miles of generally remote trails, angling in 500 miles high quality trout streams or on small warm-water impoundments, hunting, nature watching,

camping in both primitive and developed settings, visiting historical/cultural sites, rock climbing, caving, and scenic driving. Mountain biking occurs on Forest roads, some trails, and on former railroad grades. Auto touring attractions include the 22 mile-long Highland Scenic Highway, and spectacular fall leaf color. The national importance of the recreation resource has been recognized with Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area, five Wildernesses, the Scenic Highway, and two visitor centers. Smoke Hole, where the South Branch of the Potomac River has carved an impressive gorge between North Fork and Cave Mountains, has been described as one of the most remote and beautiful areas in the United States.

Economic contributions to the local and national economy from the Monongahela include receipts from Forest products such as timber, federal minerals, leased grazing land, and special use fees, plus the income earned from recreation and tourism, and the availability of products such as firewood and medicinal plants. One of the greatest economic contributions to the local economy is to serve as the "backdrop" for local businesses, including guiding services, and as a secondary attraction for those coming to ski or golf in the area.

Our management philosophy is based on the belief that public land in the Appalachians is scarce and precious. As surrounding population centers expand, the Monongahela National Forest will become increasingly rare and valuable as a place of ecologic, historic, cultural, and economic importance in the region. We believe our job is to manage the Forest for its special features, and in ways desired by today's public and future generations. As pressures mount on surrounding private lands, the Forest will focus on protecting soil and water resources, using timber management as a tool to provide healthy forests and wildlife habitat, protecting habitat for threatened, endangered and rare species, and protecting expanses of undeveloped land to provide opportunities for remote backcountry experiences.