

September 1, 2007

The Inter-Mountain (Elkins)

Physicians Prescribe an Outdoor Experience

By ANDREA SALINA, Staff Writer

West Virginia health care providers say wilderness is good medicine and have signed on to a growing chorus urging protection of the Monongahela National Forest. Locally, Dr. Chris Stout, Dawn Campbell, RN, and Barbara Boyle Weaner, FNP, have offered their support.

According to a press release from the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition, citing health-related reasons, more than 100 West Virginia health care providers have weighed in thus far to support permanent wilderness protection by Congress of the special wild places remaining in the Monongahela National Forest.

“Health care professionals are among the strongest advocates of exercise and a healthy, stress-reduced lifestyle,” said Dr. Mary Wimmer, a professor of biochemistry at the West Virginia University School of Medicine. “They see the benefits across the board for people of all ages getting out and using their legs, lungs, hearts and senses, whether for a run up a mountain or a stroll along a forest path. The wild public lands of the Mon are some of the best and most enjoyable places to do these and many other outdoor activities.”

That’s one of several reasons why health care providers are supporting the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition’s proposal to protect the Mon’s remaining wild places through congressional designation as wilderness.

The sign-on letter notes that “clean air, clean water, physical exercise, relief of stress, anxiety and other pressures of daily life, and development of self-confidence and self-esteem are important for maintaining and improving the physical and mental health and well-being of West Virginians, as well as helping prevent a variety of chronic diseases that afflict the health of many of our citizens. The undeveloped wild lands of our state, especially the public lands accessible within the Mon, can provide all of the above health benefits.”

“Protecting our state’s remaining wild forests is about more than safeguarding wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation opportunities. It’s about ensuring the

future health of our families, friends and communities by providing clean air and water, and quiet places to escape pressures of daily life,” said Dr. Karen MacKay, an associate professor of medicine at West Virginia University. “As doctors and other health care professionals, we are deeply committed to improving the overall health of West Virginians, and that includes supporting efforts that contribute toward healthy lifestyles and a high quality of life. Time spent in our treasured wild forests recharges the courage, commitment, and spirit of patients and their health care providers alike.”

Currently, just one half of 1 percent of the state is designated wilderness, with less than 9 percent of the Mon permanently protected against interstate power-line corridors, industrial energy expansion, logging, road building and other developments.

Wilderness bills are moving forward in Virginia, Georgia, Washington, New Mexico, Oregon, and other states. West Virginia’s congressional delegation, especially U.S. Rep. Nick Rahall, D-3rd District, and Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., “has the power to help ensure a natural – and healthy – legacy for future West Virginians,” Wimmer said. “We believe introduction of a wilderness bill for the Mon, to protect special places like Seneca Creek, Roaring Plains, East Fork Greenbrier and Big Draft, among others, should be a priority when Congress returns next month.”

According to the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition, state health care providers join a diverse, widespread and growing chorus urging additional wilderness designation for the Mon, which includes nearly 150 businesses across the state, the West Virginia Council of Churches, Mountaineer Chapter of Trout Unlimited, the Pocahontas and Greenbrier County Convention and Visitors Bureaus, the towns of Lewisburg, Shepherdstown and Renick, and many other organizations and individuals.

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