Press Release from the Virginia Wilderness Committee

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**New bill to expand protected wilderness areas in GW National Forest**

Lexington, VA – The *Virginia Wilderness Additions Act of 2017,* a new bill introduced by Senator Tim Kaine and co-sponsored by Senator Mark Warner, would protect 5,600 acres of Virginia’s George Washington National Forest as Wilderness. Expanding the already established Rich Hole and Rough Mountain Wildernesses will create a nearly unbroken wild area of over 20,000 acres. These lands are already part of the national forest, and the Wilderness designation would permanently protect these remarkable places, located in the scenic, rugged territory surrounding Rough Mountain and Mill Mountain in southeastern Bath County.

"The introduction of this bill is the direct result of years of hard work by the George Washington National Forest Stakeholder Collaborative. The Collaborative includes representatives from a variety of interests, including the timber industry, wildlife managers, sportsman’s groups, forestry consultants, conservation organizations, and recreational groups, all of whom are working together to meet very different goals,” said Virginia Wilderness Committee Executive Director Mark Miller. “This expanded Wilderness area will benefit wildlife, water quality, recreation, and local tourism and is a win-win for all those stakeholders involved."

Wilderness areas provide excellent habitat for wildlife that benefit from large, intact areas of old growth or mature forest. The Rich Hole area, which contains beautiful old growth hardwood forests, is home to one of the largest black bear populations in Virginia.

These Wilderness additions were recommended by the U.S. Forest Service in its 2014 management plan. Both the GW Stakeholder Collaborative and Bath County, where these areas are located, support this bill.

Formed to offer input on the 2014 forest plan, the GW Stakeholder Collaborative reached consensus on a set of recommendations for protection of core, intact areas of the forest, such as these Wilderness areas, and for increased forest management in other, more accessible areas on the periphery of the forest. The collaborative continues to work together and with the U.S. Forest Service and other interested parties towards those goals.

A Forest Service project called the Lower Cowpasture Restoration and Management Project, which is now being carried out, is an example of that collaborative work. The project, located on GW Forest lands in the lower Cowpasture River watershed, provides active management in the more accessible areas of the national forest, including: timber harvest, forest restoration, prescribed fire, stream restoration, and an American Chestnut restoration site. This balanced, collaborative approach is a win-win for management, recreation, restoration and Wilderness.

**FAQ For Background: What is Wilderness?**

* Wilderness areas are portions of national forests, or other federal lands, which have natural character and where the imprint of any prior land uses are substantially unnoticeable. Only Congress may designate Wilderness areas; this is the highest level of protection available for public land. Wilderness proposals usually are developed from the ground up and brought to Congress by local citizens, like the proposed additions to Rich Hole and Rough Mountain.
* Designated Wilderness offers outstanding opportunities for people to enjoy solitude and backcountry-type recreation, forested refuges for wildlife and fish, clean water and air, and other natural values.
* Hiking, camping, backpacking, hunting, horseback riding, paddling, birdwatching, and many other forms of non-mechanized recreation are allowed and enjoyed in Wilderness.
* To preserve the wild character of these special areas, timber harvest, permanent roads, drilling, and other development are not allowed. The use of motorized equipment, motor vehicles, or other mechanical transport is normally not allowed, except when necessary for control of fire, insects, and diseases, and for search and rescue operations.
* Current uses and access to the proposed Rich Hole and Rough Mountain Wilderness Additions will NOT change. No open roads or trails will be closed, and there are no mountain bike or OHV areas in these areas. And because the Forest Service already classifies these areas as “roadless,” no logging or road building is currently allowed.
* Wilderness designation does not affect hunting or fishing rules, which are determined by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.
* Since this land is already federally owned and part of the George Washington National Forest, no land acquisition is required. There are no private inholdings within the proposed Wilderness additions.