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Wilderness bill to protect 5,600 acres in Bath passes

January 09, 2020

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — The Virginia Wilderness Additions Act passed the U.S. Senate Tuesday, and could add 5,600 acres to two wilderness areas in the George Washington National Forest in Bath County.

The legislation would add the Rough Mountain Wilderness Area and the Rich Hole Wilderness Area to areas designated as wilderness.

A wilderness designation is the highest level of protection for public land under federal law.

The additions were recommended by the U.S. Forest Service in 2014 and have been endorsed by members of the George Washington National Forest Stakeholder Collaborative, a group of forest users that has worked together for seven years to agree on acceptable locations on the GWNF for wilderness, timber harvest, trails and other uses.

U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine met with stakeholders in Bath County in July 2018 to thank them for their work toward having the additional land designated as wilderness. Kaine, along with U.S. Sen. Mark Warner, sponsored the bill.

Stakeholders attending that 2018 meeting included representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, Virginia Department of Forestry, Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards, Southern Environmental Law Center, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and Virginia Wildlife Habitat Coalition.

“We’re proud that the Senate passed our bill to protect wilderness in Bath County. The George Washington National Forest is a critical part of Virginia’s environment and economy,” Kaine and Warner said in a joint statement this week. “This legislation would help ensure Virginians can enjoy more of its wildlife, scenery and trails for generations to come. We’re so thankful to

folks from the U.S. Forest Service, conservationists and leaders in Bath County for their collaborative efforts to make this happen.”

Mark Miller, executive director of the Virginia Wilderness Committee, also applauded the bill’s passage. “Senate passage of the Virginia Wilderness Additions Act affirms our belief that working in a collaborative manner with diverse interest groups including the timber industry, wildlife managers and recreation interests creates an atmosphere where dialogue promotes trust and compromise,” he said. “It is in this spirit of collaboration that the stakeholder collaborative agreed to a plan that balances the need for managed young forest, recreation and uninterrupted wilderness.”

The Virginia Forestry Association also said it supports the bill. “I have supported an increase in active management of the George Washington National Forest while working with a diverse group of people that share a common interest in our public lands. Where previously we have advocated for different uses of the forest, we now look for ways to accomplish all our goals,” said VFA member and former president John Hancock.

“I support the proposed wilderness additions in this bill by understanding that the GW is large enough to provide a variety of forest conditions, through differing management techniques, as identified in the forest plan. It is possible to simultaneously increase timber harvests, improve wildlife habitat and create forest age diversity while setting aside remote areas that are valuable for recreation and certain species of wildlife. This proposal reinforces several years’ worth of work and demonstrates the ability to accomplish this balance,” Hancock continued.

The bill now goes to the House of Representatives. Should it pass there, it would go to the President for possible signature into law.

“We’ll keep working together to get this bill signed into law,” Kaine and Warner said.

The legislation passed the Senate unanimously.