



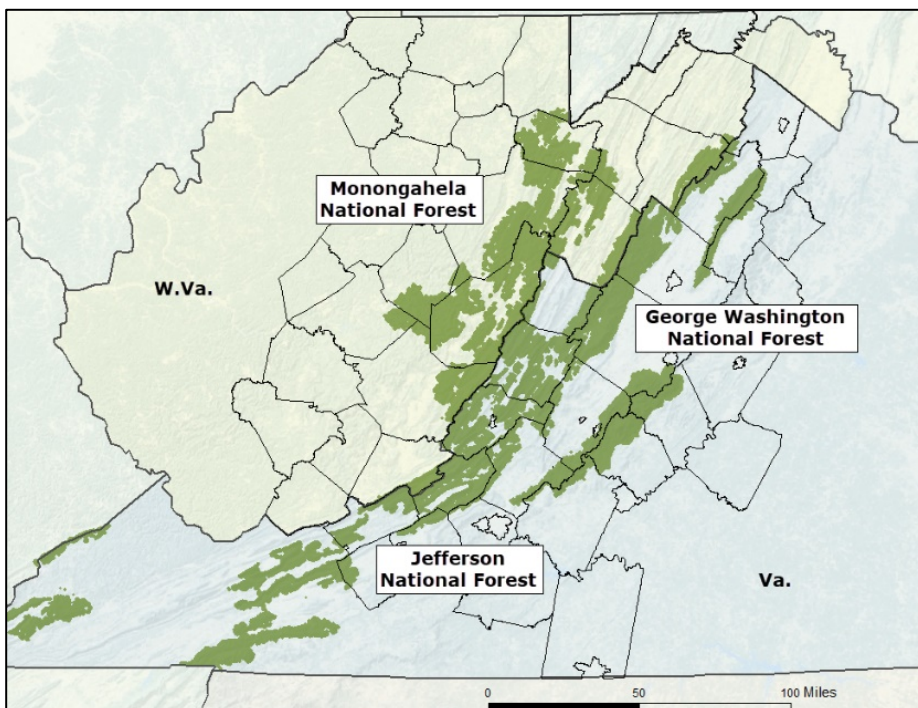
## Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance Conservation Hub

# THE NATIONAL FOREST MAPPING PROJECT

The National Forest Mapping Project (NFMP) is a monitoring program to track proposed and ongoing projects in the three National Forests that are located within the Central Appalachian Highlands (Monongahela in West Virginia and George Washington and Jefferson in Virginia). The project is part of the Conservation Hub program of the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance (ABRA).

ABRA is a coalition of conservation groups in Virginia and West Virginia dedicated to promoting and protecting the ecological integrity of the Central Appalachian Highlands. The Conservation Hub is designed to significantly enhance the capabilities of environmental, conservation, and citizen groups to assess impacts of projects in the Highlands region and to help assure that the overall environmental integrity of the region is maintained.

The Central Appalachian Highlands is an ecologically unique area of remnant wild landscape and high-quality streams. Embracing the eastern half of West Virginia and the western third of Virginia, the area has some of the world's oldest mountains and is the habitat for a diversity of plants and animals that depend on the ecological integrity of the region's high-elevation forested watersheds. In a context of changing climate, the area represents an important refugium for many species and biological communities. The Highlands also contain the headwaters of some of the major river systems in the eastern United States, including the Potomac, James, Cheat, Greenbrier, Elk, Gauley, and New Rivers. The extremely steep slopes of the mountains, together with highly erodible soils and karst valleys, make the area among the most landslide-prone and hydrologically vulnerable in the country. These combined characteristics make the Central Appalachian Highlands worthy of special conservation attention.



*National Forests of the Central Appalachian Highlands region, in relation to West Virginia and Virginia counties in the Conservation Hub's primary focus area. The National Forests represent the core of the region's natural landscape.*

## **Why is the project needed and who will benefit?**

The NFMP will support informed review of proposed Forest Service land and water management projects, as well as other public and private-use projects in the National Forests. At any given time, there are several dozen projects underway or under consideration within the three National Forests. The NFMP will provide valuable assistance to conservation groups throughout Virginia and West Virginia in keeping apprised of these projects and their impact on the region and the surrounding communities. By combining a map-based clearinghouse for forest management and use proposals with access to critical environmental information, the NFMP will promote public and regulatory agency communication during the project review process. The NFMP will thus enable the kind of collaboration and shared responsibility that will be necessary if we are to preserve and protect the National Forests of the Central Appalachian Highlands.

## **How will the project work?**

The NFMP will provide an online Geographic Information System with selectable information layers, including the locations of proposed and ongoing projects in the National Forests and the specific locations of project activities within project boundaries. The NFMP will also provide regulatory and environmental context with access to a range of additional information layers relevant to individual project review, including National Forest management prescriptions and environmental information such as land use and land cover, species and biological community status, geophysical and hydrologic properties, and ecological assessments and projections. The NFMP will thereby help ensure that individual projects are not evaluated in isolation or without consideration of the cumulative impacts of multiple projects, past land use, and projected ecological change. In addition to map-based access to project details and related information, the NFMP will provide access to assessment and decision documents, including those required by rules that apply to the Forest Service and other agencies with review responsibilities.

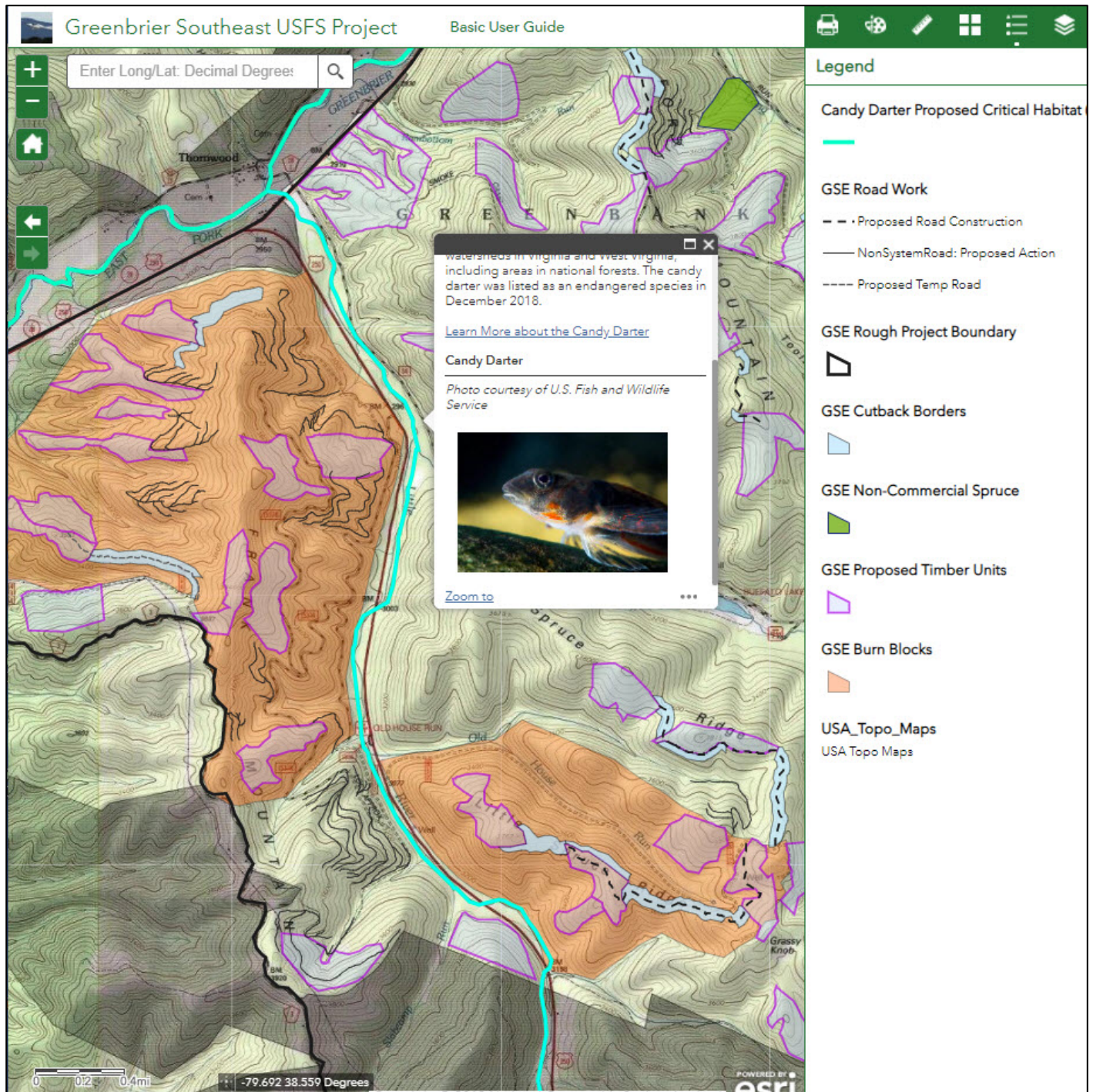
The NFMP will thus make available in one place, the wide range of information concerning National Forest project plans, environmental conditions, and regulatory requirements that is needed for informed and effective project review but is ordinarily difficult to find and organize. The NFMP will make a new level of public involvement in National Forest planning possible. See below for an example of a proposed project in the Monongahela National Forest that the ABRA Conservation Hub has mapped and is following.

## **Going forward**

The success of the Conservation Hub's National Forest Map Project will depend on the engagement of conservation groups and the concerned public who seek transparency, coherence, and objectivity in National Forest planning and management. A team representing ABRA member groups is coordinating development of the project.

*For more information about ABRA and the Conservation Hub: see <https://www.abralliance.org>*

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A Conservation Hub map view depicting details of the Greenbrier Southeast (GSE) project in relation to proposed critical habitat for the endangered candy darter (*Etheostoma osburni*). The GSE project is a 16,888-acre Forest Service proposal in the Monongahela National Forest in the upper reaches of the Greenbrier River. The candy darter, which was listed as endangered in 2018, is associated with clean cool water and forested mountain watersheds. Its historically diminished geographic distribution indicates a loss of watershed and aquatic ecosystem integrity. As with other at-risk species and biological communities in the Central Appalachian Highlands, the future of the candy darter depends on informed conservation today.