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Questions raised about fracking in Highland

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — George Washington National Forest has released a long-awaited revision of its management plan stating, with the exception of forest in eastern and western Highland County, GWNF is still mostly unavailable for oil and gas leasing.

The revision raised questions over the future of gas exploration in Highland, where private leases are still held on about 10,000 acres of forestland, none of which are active.

But news reports scattered widely made it sound like at least this portion of the GWNF could still be subject to gas development. An Associated Press story headline read, “Fracking to occur in East Coast’s largest forest,” which stressed the leased acreage in Highland was still available for drilling.

Warm Springs District Ranger Patrick Sheridan this week emphasized that a lease does not provide the right to drill.

The 10,000 acres of leases are all in Highland, and are broken up in noncontiguous parcels on the eastern and western sides of the county, he said. The leases are inactive, speculative in nature and were made to exclude companies other than those who hold the leases.

They do not include any part of the Laurel Fork Special Management Area, Sheridan stressed.

GWNF in a news release stated the plan “includes a decision that limits availability for new oil and gas leasing, while establishing a comprehensive framework for potential development on about 10,000 acres where there are existing valid leases, as well as on 167,200 acres with existing private mineral rights. Presently, none of the existing federal leases or existing privately owned mineral rights on the forest are active.”

Further, it stated, “There is also no mineral development occurring on adjacent private lands. The decision does not prohibit any specific technology for developing oil and gas resources, including hydraulic fracturing. Any proposal to develop existing leases on the forest would undergo additional environmental analysis and provide opportunities for public comment and engagement.”

Wild Virginia issued a press release this week about the plan. “It is clear that the U.S. Forest Service has listened and responded to the most emphatic concerns of the public on all sides,” said Misty Boos, Wild Virginia’s managing director. “The result is a mixed bag where the scales will tilt back and forth as projects are developed.”

Wild Virginia noted the plan makes about 83 percent of the forest unavailable for oil and gas drilling, but about the private leases still held, “This means we will have to fight leases and projects one at a time,” she said.

While the exploration for oil and gas locally has been largely inactive, a section of the plan titled, “A Reasonably Foreseeable Development Scenario” for energy resource exploitation says that “the oil and gas development potential for GWNF is considered as high.”

The plan states there has been drilling activity in the Bergton area of Rockingham County across the state line from West Virginia.

The forest plan revision drew both praise and concern. Conservation groups hailed the revision as protecting the millions who rely on drinking water from the origins, or headwaters, of the James and Potomac rivers.

The fact that these headwaters are mainly in Highland was largely glossed over in news releases, but one local environmental scientist was skeptical that future gas exploration could take place here.

“I don’t think fracking will happen in Highland County,” said Rick Webb of Mustoe, a water quality scientist. “There are a lot of environmental reasons against it. The risks would make it unacceptable.”

U.S. Senators Mark Warner and Tim Kaine applauded the GWNF plan in a joint statement: “We have long urged the forest service to seriously consider the concerns of Virginians about the potential impacts of horizontal drilling and applaud (GWNF) Supervisor Sparks for taking the time to ensure all stakeholders were heard during this process.”

“This decision protects the existing uses and values of the special George Washington National Forest,” agreed Sarah Francisco, senior attorney at the Southern Environmental Law Center.

Highlanders for Responsible Development reported about the plan in a newsletter Monday. “Of particular interest to HRD is the decision regarding oil and gas leasing in the GWNF,” the newsletter states.

The plan says the 51,000 acres that are congressionally withdrawn from mineral entry (i.e. Wilderness and the Mount Pleasant National Scenic Area) will continue to be legally unavailable for federal oil and gas leasing. The roughly 10,000 acres of mineral rights under current federal oil and gas leases will continue to be available for federal oil and gas leasing.

All other areas of the GWNF are “administratively unavailable” for federal oil and gas leasing at this time. In total, about 1,056,000 acres are unavailable for federal oil and gas leasing. This decision does not affect the roughly 167,000 acres of subsurface mineral rights owned by private parties that are available by law.

“In his cover letter releasing the plan, GWNF Supervisor H. Thomas Speaks Jr. explained that the decision on oil and gas leasing was based on a number of factors, including: the low amount of estimated gas reserves under the GWNF compared to the entire Marcellus shale formation; the lack of interest in any gas development on GWNF lands or surrounding private and state lands; and expressed concerns, particularly from our local governments and communities,” HRD said.

Highland County’s Board of Supervisors was one of the jurisdictions that expressed views to the GWNF about the plan revision. Its letter voiced opposition to permitting hydraulic fracturing on forest lands.

“We are pleased with the potential for increased wilderness,” Boos continued. The forest service has recognized the importance of increasing four existing wilderness areas by a total of 12,000 acres and of adding 15,200 acres in Little River and Beech Lick Knob. It also has recommended creating a 90,000 Shenandoah Mountain National Scenic Area.

However, Wild Virginia said, the plan poses challenges for conservation in the forest.

“The new forest plan throws open the doors for removing up to 8.75 million tons of ‘uncommercial timber’ for biomass burning that serves no public benefit,” said Ernie Reed, Wild Virginia’s president. “But the big loser is the endangered Indiana Bat,” Reed added, “who will lose up to 23,000 acres of potential habitat as the number of acres suitable for timber production increases to over 450,000 acres.”

Indiana Bat populations have been decimated in Virginia in the past decade due to white-nose syndrome. “The plan is likely to have its own impacts on the decreasing bat population in Virginia,” he said.

The new plan does not address the application by Dominion Resources proposing to survey forestland for its proposed gas transmission pipeline.

But, Boos noted, “The biggest imminent threat to the forest is not any aspect of the forest plan but the potential Atlantic Coast Pipeline that lies outside the scope of the plan. The pipeline would slice through the southern part of Shenandoah Mountain and render some of the more positive aspects of the plan moot.”

Reed agreed. “It now becomes even more important to stop the pipeline and to monitor projects in the forest that the plan may allow, to assess their potential impacts and to advocate for appropriate conservation measures on the ground,” he said. “On the ground and in the forest is where targeted forest protection is most needed.”

The complete documentation of the forest plan is available at www.fs.fed.us/gwjef/index.php.