

## **Forest protection championed** ***Senate bill would close roadless national forests to development***

By Bob Gibson / Daily Progress staff writer  
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A Charlottesville environmental group appealed Tuesday for public support of a bill U.S. Sen. John W. Warner, R-Alexandria, has introduced to preserve undisturbed national forest lands.

Warner's bill to conserve the roadless areas that remain in the nation's 92-year-old national forest system won warm endorsement from the Southern Environmental Law Center at a local rally attended by about 30 area residents.

Virginia's approximately 400,000 acres of undisturbed national forest land, some of it just north and west of Staunton, is the largest group of roadless areas in the national forests east of the Mississippi River, said David Carr, senior attorney with the SELC.

"These areas are very important for wildlife — black bear and various types of songbirds" and remain open for recreation and hunting, Carr said.

Carr said the Southern Appalachian forests from Virginia's mountains south to Georgia "are the most biologically diverse forests in the world" outside the tropics.

The rule to protect the roadless areas remaining in those forests "protects the status quo for those areas and puts them off limits for development," he said.

Carr said the Bush administration has proposed dismantling the popular Roadless Area Conservation Rule that Warner and at least 155 members of the House of Representatives would like to write into law.

He urged those attending the rally to write their members of Congress and Gov. Mark R. Warner to encourage them to oppose administration plans to let governors exempt the national forests in their states from the rule.

"Contact Warner to oppose state-by-state exemptions," Carr said. "We need governors to let the Bush administration know that theirs is a flawed proposal."

More than 2 million Americans have spoken up in favor of protecting the roadless areas that remain in the national forests, Carr told the rally at the Blue Ridge Mountain Sports store in the Barracks Road Shopping Center.

"The Bush administration is absolutely ignoring those 2 million comments," said Shoren Brown, an Alaskan outdoorsman who attended the rally as part of the Heritage Forests Campaign's "Whistle-stop Tour."

"It's time to protect what's left" from the logging and oil and gas interests that have the administration's ear, Brown said.

In Alaska, the Tongass National Forest, the nation's largest, would be exempted from the Roadless Area Conservation Rule. "Seventy percent of it currently is open for timbering and mining, so let's protect the last 30 percent of it," Brown told the rally. Virginia Forest Watch, another conservation group, also helped sponsor the evening event that included a slide show, environmental talks and a 6-by-8-foot inflatable tree stump that drew stares from passing shoppers after it was blown up in front of the outdoor sports equipment store.

Sen. Warner introduced the Roadless Area Conservation Act of 2003 on June 5 with Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., and called the legislation "a reasoned approach to forest management that balances the conservation of forest lands for future generations with economic activities." Warner said the pristine lands his bill would protect make up only 31 percent of America's national forests.

Sue George, president of the Charlottesville Area Mountain Bike Club, said mountain bikers "enjoy riding in quiet back-country areas" and work to maintain bike trails

through them. They are truly "places of renewal of the human spirit," she said.  
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