

### *Executive Summary*

In the summer of 2003 a team from the Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Resources Program of West Virginia University's Division of Forestry, in partnership with the United States Forest Service, conducted an assessment including 32 communities and ten counties within a ten mile buffer of the Monongahela National Forest on West Virginia's eastern border with Virginia.

The purpose of the assessment is to characterize the social and economic environment of the Monongahela National Forest by showing the relationship and linkages between National Forest System land and communities. This assessment will help the Forest Service and the public (1) better understand the relationship between public lands and communities; (2) aid in identifying specific elements of the current forest plans that may need to be changed; and (3) assemble the information needed to evaluate trade-offs between options for future forest management. The information from this assessment will serve to highlight the forest's unique position and clarify the forest's role in and key contributions to the local community, the state, and the nation. The assessment is broadly useful to the forest and the public, as a basis for well-informed consideration of future alternatives within and beyond the planning process.

Data compiled for the assessment included Census and West Virginia Tourism data to determine trends; GIS layers of the Monongahela National Forest infrastructure, resources, and land ownership to inventory recreation opportunities (ROS); and public comment from the initial Notice of Intent published in the Federal Register (May 2002) to assess public concerns about land use issues for the Forest Plan revision. This data was used to guide the assessment through several questions. For each question, key findings are presented:

- 1) What are the socio-economic conditions of people and communities residing in the vicinity of the Monongahela National Forest? What trends are evident in these socio-economic conditions and how might these affect or be affected by uses of the Monongahela National Forest in the future?
  - West Virginia, and especially the Monongahela region, is predominantly a homogenous population of White Americans. There is an increase in adults near retirement and the decrease in young adults. This and the fact

that there is an increase in divorce rate support the reduction in family size in the Monongahela region.

- Second homes may also contribute to sprawl and encroach on public lands. This changes the dynamic forest zones and may increase fragmentation. Similarly, as more native West Virginians maintain their residence there may be conflict with recreational homeowners. The introduction of both Corridor H and high numbers of second homes in Tucker County may fuel conflict between the new visitors/part time residents and the large contingent of locals who have maintained long-term residency in this county (specifically, in Davis and Thomas).
  - There is an inverse relationship between the rate of change in the commodity (decrease) and amenity (increase) industries (especially in Davis and Thomas of Tucker County). The high percentage of both industries suggests both industries can coincide, however, there is also a greater potential for conflict.
- 2) What are tourism visitation trends in the region and state and how might these affect or be affected by uses of the Monongahela National Forest in the future?
- The Monongahela National Forest is a regional destination for nature-based tourism. Gateways communities in the Monongahela region are well positioned to capitalize on tourism growth though many communities currently lack adequate infrastructure and visitor services to support sustainable tourism development.
- 3) What is the supply of recreation opportunities within the Monongahela National Forest and how can these opportunities be classified and mapped to help guide future management alternatives?
- There are a wide variety of recreation opportunities available on the Monongahela National Forest even though significant portions of lands within the Forest proclamation boundary are not in Federal ownership and not available for public recreation use. Half of all land within the Forest boundary is within a ½ mile buffer of improved roads.
- 4) What interest groups and organizations are concerned about the future of the Monongahela National Forest and what are their concerns, issues, values, and preferences about future uses of the Monongahela National Forest?
- The Monongahela National Forest attracted comments from areas across the country, though a majority of comments came from the Washington, D.C. area as well as internally within West Virginia. Multiple organizations as well as the public commented on land use concerns spread across the Monongahela region. The Dolly Sods/National

Recreation Area and Cranberry Wilderness areas had a higher concentration of land use concerns. Specifically, local-based issues of concern are Corridor H and the Dolly Sods area.

- 5) What implications do the preceding issues and trends have for the future of forest management within the Monongahela National Forest?
- The Monongahela National Forest should explore a range of partnership opportunities that are available to improve the quality and diversity of outdoor recreation. Examples include issue-based working groups to improve citizen participation in National Forest decision-making and help improve public acceptance of forest management decisions.
  - Sense of place should be considered as many comments centered on particular personal experiences and locations through the Monongahela National Forest that enhanced or detracted from their overall experience. Research is needed on information that enhances visitors appreciation for local resources and directs them to areas that are likely to meet their recreational needs also can contribute to a better “sense of place”.
  - As suggested by public comment and interest, the Monongahela National Forest should further explore their natural resource recreation base by developing a trails plan for the National Forest and a management plan for the National Recreation Area.