

Allegheny Forest Alliance

Winter 2008 Newsletter

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TEMPORARY INCONVENIENCE

Please be informed that I will be out of commission for most of February due to pending surgery. Call it a “temporary inconvenience for permanent improvement” as those folks at the PennDOT like to suggest. The date of the event is February 7 at which time I will have a total right hip replacement. Best estimates indicate about a month to recuperate with limited activity as soon as two weeks following the surgery. Linda will continue to monitor communications daily and carry on necessary business while I am recuperating. I will also take my computer home and work as I am able.

Since February will be a difficult month to conduct business, the regularly scheduled winter meeting of the AFA Board of Directors has been cancelled. If there is a need for a meeting sometime in late winter or early spring, I will consult the Executive Committee. The next regularly scheduled meeting will be the spring meeting to be held tentatively on **Tuesday, May 13**. More about that meeting will be forthcoming as the date approaches.

As I mentioned, Linda and I will continue to access all messages and will transact business in as timely a manner as is possible. Linda would ask that you address a problem that is becoming ever more increasing. As your email addresses change please let us know so we can stay in touch. Thank you for your understanding.

REVOLVING CHAIRS

For the life of me, I cannot understand the rationale behind the musical chairs continually being played out among supervisors within the United States Forest Service. As you are no doubt aware, Kathleen Morse has been moved to the Lassen National Forest in California after only two years at the helm on the Allegheny. She has been replaced by Leanne Marten, who comes to us from the Huron-Manistee in Michigan where she has served as supervisor for the last five years.



To complicate matters even more, the regional supervisor, Randy Moore, was recently moved to the Southwest Region and has been replaced by Kent Connaughton, who arrives from somewhere out west. It is hard for me to understand how anyone can get an adequate feel for the job when tenure is so short.

Just as confusing, how can shifting supervisors east to west and vice versa make sense given the diverse nature of the resource to be managed? Hardwoods in the east require completely different attention than do softwoods found out west and in parts of the south. Remember, Ms. Morse’s predecessor, Kevin

Elliot? He came from the west, stayed three or four years and returned to the west. Kathleen took virtually the same train having come from Inyo National Forest in California and now has returned to a forest just north of the Inyo.

It would seem to make more sense appointing supervisors who have knowledge of the region and the type of resources to be managed as well as the conditions under which management must be accomplished. Then the powers to be in DC should allow the supervisor time to develop an appreciation for the scope of the assignment along with time to develop working relationships with the ground troops that rarely are moved, but truly know and appreciate the forest they have worked on most of their lives.

Perhaps just as important, the supervisor needs to be in place long enough to understand and appreciate the concerns of the local citizens, who for the most part see the forest as an integral part of the customs and culture of their society. For them, it is not just another one of the 155 national forests; it is THE national forest.

How does that old saying go, “You must walk a mile in my shoes.....?” So too, the supervisor must live the conditions for an extended period in order to adequately understand and appreciate what they are managing. In Kathleen’s defense, she is now returning to a condition in which she is most familiar having lived in the region most of her life. Hopefully, the USFS will allow her to stay there where she has worn out many pairs of shoes.

PETERSON ANNOUNCEMENT

Long time Congressman John Peterson, in a surprise and to some shocking announcement, informed his constituents in early January he would not be seeking a seventh term as the representative for the 5th Congressional District. He will turn 70 this year as he finishes his sixth term and even though he says he feels young at heart, he has some non-threatening but chronic maladies at home to address.

Mr. Peterson plans to remain in Pleasantville and will continue to do what he can to promote policies that will increase employment opportunities and responsible use of natural resources, two of the many issues he has worked hard at during his tenure in Congress. In fact, he has led the charge in DC regarding oil and gas exploration on the Outer Continental Shelf, very nearly pulling off a successful piece of legislation last year. Hopefully, he will be successful before his term expires at the end of this year. Among his most notable accomplishments, Mr. Peterson successfully promoted legislation to improve Medicare funding for rural healthcare facilities for which he received “Legislator of the Year” recognition in 2002.

Most recently, Congressman Peterson has stood firm against Commonwealth government (for which he served respectfully for twenty years) in total opposition to tolling of Interstate 80. He, along with most of his constituents strongly believes it would be a huge detriment to business, both locally and statewide.

During his twelve years in Congress, Mr. Peterson has ascended to several positions of authority and strength. He has earned respect not only of his constituents, but also his colleagues on both sides of the aisle. He will be sorely missed by those among us who are interested in the economic health and well being of this region. I personally and the AFA generally, will miss having the Congressman promote our interests in Washington as he has so successfully done over the years. We do, however, wish he and his wife Sandra good health and much happiness as they begin a new chapter in their lives.

FAILED ATTEMPT

A valiant effort was made in the waning months of 2007 to get the Secure Rural Schools legislation reauthorized. In fact, it was the most concerted effort to date and it almost succeeded. Almost.

Following an all-court press from September through December, the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition (NFCSC) very nearly got a reauthorization package to the President's desk. An energy bill that included reauthorization passed the House in November, but became bogged down in the Senate due primarily to unrelated spending issues that were not supported by the President. When the bill finally reached the floor for a vote, reauthorization along with several other spending measures was stripped out of the language.

It is important to report the reauthorization effort contained some major pitfalls, particularly with regard to Pennsylvania. As much as most of the remaining nation would like not to admit it, the ANF is truly unique. What works in most other forests (and states) just does not fit here. This latest reauthorization effort is a classic case in point.



For one thing, both Congressional efforts included a 10% per annum ramp down in funding over the four year life of the reauthorization. Mathematically, what would be received in the fourth year would only be 60% of what is received this year. For most of the nation that still is a winning proposition. Not so in PA, however. Quite likely 25% payments from a reasonable amount of timber harvesting would yield a greater amount than only 60-70% of the current payment proposed in the reauthorization effort. At least it would warrant analysis. That is precisely why the AFA insisted on an annual opt-out provision as a safeguard for our state. Unfortunately, the provision was excluded from the bill.

Second, the payments to counties were tempered by two other criteria that more than likely would have resulted in an even lesser yearly payment. Each county's allotment was stacked up against the median per capita income as well as the median percentage of national forest acreage. On both scores, PA stood to lose.

A third area of diminished return involved PILT (payment in lieu of taxes). Counties receive a small percentage reimbursement for every acre of federal, non-taxable land within their borders. The bill attempted to sweeten the pot by increasing PILT to offset the diminishing safety-net. Unfortunately, because of PA's uniqueness related to other states, counties in this commonwealth do not manage roads or schools. Therefore, any money received in the general treasury at the county level via PILT would not make its way to townships or school districts for roads and school management as original law intended.

Another drawback to the pending bill was the withholding of Title III money that traditionally has been used by counties to help finance various categorical projects tied to the forest. Under the proposed legislation, counties would only receive half the money up front and would only get the other half when and if resource advisory committees (RACs) were formed. Counties in PA had averaged approximately one quarter million dollars annually under the original authorization. Cutting that amount by more than half, would be a severe blow to county treasuries.

The last issue of note in the package involved the exclusive right granted to California, Washington and Oregon. Those three states were “held harmless” from the ramp down the first year. Of the eight states including PA that stood to lose the most money in this reauthorization effort, three were extended the privilege of hold harmless while the other five were not. But remember, “All is fair in love and politics.”

So, what can we expect in the short run? The effort for reauthorization will begin again this spring, but at ground zero. Many are tiring of the effort, both in Congress and among the coalition. As it currently stands, all the states will be returning to 25% payment beginning with FY’08. That means, unless Congress pulls off a miracle, the payments school districts and townships receive in the spring of 2009 will be based on the traditional 25% contract. Because of the fortunate uniqueness of the ANF, such a change may not be too bad.

COORDINATED COUNTY PLANNING

When the new ANF forest plan hit the streets last February, the AFA filed an appeal citing several procedural and substantive irregularities that caused the LRMP to be fatally flawed in our opinion. In fact, there were 78 appeals filed for various reasons related to faulty decisions in the plan. The Forest Service to date has not responded to any of those appeals.

One of the issues of great concern to the coalition was the fact that the planning process did not comply with regulations that require “early and frequent” coordination with local municipalities. Planning was initiated in 2003 and the earliest recorded coordination with counties and townships was in the spring of 2005, a full two years later. Several important and basic issues had been determined long before local planning authorities ever had an opportunity for dedicated input.

In short, the counties were not afforded the opportunity to be proactive, but rather were reduced to being reactive. Given the ANF’s stature as the largest single landowner in the four counties and considering the wood industry being arguably among the top three economic engines in those counties, reacting to Forest Service decisions and hoping they are in the best interest of the culture, customs and economy of each county is not good enough. The counties must be seated at the table “early and frequently” to ensure what activities occur on the forest are truly in the best interest of the affected county/s.



In some way, shape or form, each county must pursue “coordinated county planning.” It is legally mandated in federal law that the Forest Service coordinates its planning with the land and resource management planning process of local governments. When applied, the Forest Service must notify the county regarding any management activities even before they notify the general public. Simply put, counties that seek to enforce this regulation are to be given a seat at the table for joint planning as the plans are being formulated to ensure they coordinate with county plans.

Coordinated county planning requires a county to have a county plan and to notify the Forest Service of same. It requires considerable dedication to review all Forest Service proposals in order to determine the potential impact on the county plan, but in light of their status as the most significant landholder in each county, it is necessary. It allows the county to be proactive rather than reactive.

No doubt, the Forest Service would resist coordinated county planning. Human nature does not take kindly to meddling. They would much prefer a cooperating agency approach, which is far less intrusive and more highly regulated. Coordinated county planning affords a seat at the planning table from the very onset of planning, which in effect creates a partnership of sorts with the Forest Service.

If the counties truly want to hold the largest landowner in their domain accountable, they must insist that they have a seat at the planning table.

AFA ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING HELD

The annual membership meeting of the AFA was held on January 21st at the Kane Area High School. Attendance was light compared to previous years, but that did not put a damper on the discussion. The evening began with a short introduction by President Sandra Chlopecki, superintendent of schools for the Kane Areas School District. She emphasized the importance membership involvement and the need to broaden the base of the coalition. She firmly believes the success of the organization depends on moving from passive to active involvement.

Executive Director, Jack Hedlund gave his report next, which included a rundown on the new LRMP for the ANF. The new plan went into effect in May, but has subjected to at least 78 appeals including one from the AFA. The Forest Service is expected to conclude their analysis of the appeals by February 15 at which time they will choose one of three routes. They can scrap the plan and start over, amend it, or stick to it as it is with the expectation of legal challenge.

Mr. Hedlund also reported on the fate of the safety-net for school districts and townships. Although the 44 receiving entities will once again obtain secure rural schools funding this spring, the picture for next spring and beyond remains tenuous. As it stands currently without any reauthorization package, the traditional 25% payments will once again be the vehicle that helps fund our roads and schools beginning in 2009. It will be imperative for local agencies including the AFA to monitor activities on the ANF closely as they relate to total yearly receipts.

Guest speakers for the evening included 5th Congressional District Representative John Peterson and State Representative Kathy Rapp. Both spoke of the need to maintain a productive forest, which is and will remain a vital part of the local and regional economy. Although Mr. Peterson has announced he will not seek another term in Congress, he pledged to continue leading the fight for energy independence for our nation his last year in office, which includes tapping the resources found in abundance in this region and beyond. He referenced a recent study by a Penn State group that indicates a tremendous amount of available natural gas in this part of the state, so much so that Pennsylvania could once again become a hub of energy resources much like the turn of the twentieth century.

Your membership contribution for 2008 is due. Payment ensures you are represented in advocating for multiple-use management and a sustained yield on the Allegheny National Forest. Thank you.

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