



# Athens Conservancy

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**Athens Conservancy  
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Anne Carey  
Wayne National Forest Supervisor  
Nelsonville, OH  
13700 US Highway 33  
Nelsonville, OH 45764

**RE: Need for environmental impact analysis prior to decision  
regarding leasing of WNF parcels for gas/oil drilling**

Cc: Rachel Orwan, Chuck Myers, Elizabeth Sporcich

Dear Ms Carey:

On October 3, 2011, the Athens Conservancy submitted a formal protest to the Bureau of Land Management opposing their planned offering of several parcels of Wayne National Forest land for gas and oil extraction. We on the Athens Conservancy board were greatly relieved to learn later in the fall that you withdrew the WNF's approval of the planned sale of leases pending further study. However, we have recently learned that you may reauthorize the sale without an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), an action that we strongly oppose. This letter reiterates the reasons why we object to the leases and relates them to the need for a full environmental impact analysis before any gas/oil leases are authorized.

The Athens Conservancy is a 501(c)(3) land trust whose mission is the protection of open-space lands in Athens County, Ohio. The Conservancy owns several nature preserves, which are open to the public. One of them, known as the Bluebell Preserve, is contiguous with one of the Wayne National Forest parcels that the BLM proposed to lease for gas and oil extraction (Tract A-8103 within ES-045-12/11). We are concerned that the release of hydrofracturing fluid and air emissions from a well on this tract could damage or destroy the forest that this preserve was established to protect.

Before authorizing any major action that is not covered in the EIS of the most recent forest plan and that could significantly affect "the quality of the human environment" (NEPA sec. 1502.3), the National Environmental Policy Act requires the U.S. Forest Service to assess "ecological (such as the effects on natural resources and on the components, structures, and functioning of affected ecosystems), aesthetic, historic, cultural, economic, social, or health" effects of the proposed activity, "whether direct, indirect, or cumulative". Indirect effects are "caused by the action and

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are later in time or farther removed in distance, but are still reasonably foreseeable.” (NEPA sec. 1508.8). Because high volume horizontal hydraulic fracturing (fracking) was not being used in our region when the EIS for the most recent (2006) forest plan was prepared, the impacts of gas/oil drilling that were considered did not take into account the vast differences between today’s fracking technology and the conventional drilling technology that was in use at that time. High-volume horizontal hydrofracturing qualifies as a major action that was not covered in the previous EIS, and one that is known to have had major impacts on the quality of the human environment elsewhere in the country, so it seems clear to us that NEPA requires an EIS before the WNF authorizes the use of this technology on its land.

The Athens Conservancy’s Bluebell Preserve was established because it has an unusually dense and diverse herb layer beneath a healthy forest canopy. The preserve is not badly impacted by invasive non-native plants, as the majority of Ohio woodlands are. Its position along the Hockhocking-Adena Bikeway enables the public to enjoy a luxuriant display of native spring wildflowers, which attract many visitors. Because the area is underlain by the Utica Shale, we assume that any company bidding on a lease on the adjacent WNF parcel (Tract A-8103) will be planning to use horizontal hydrofracturing to access the gas and oil in this and possibly other deep shale layers. Although the proponents of this technology claim it is safe, Ohio regulations permit volatilization and/or flaring of organic compounds and methane, which will impact air quality and forest health. Ohio regulations permitting open pits for fracking sludge will also imperil air and water quality in the vicinity. Furthermore, accidents have occurred in the course of drilling and hydrofracturing in other states that have exposed people and natural biotic communities to toxic chemicals. There is no reason to assume that accidents would not happen here if horizontal hydrofracturing is permitted.

In an experimental study conducted by a US Forest Service soil scientist in West Virginia, recently reported in a peer-reviewed scientific journal (*Journal of Environmental Quality* 40:1340-1344 [2011]), it was demonstrated that hydrofracturing fluid can cause severe damage to forest vegetation. “During application [of hydrofracturing fluid], severe damage and mortality of ground vegetation was observed, followed about 10 d[ays] later by premature leaf drop by the overstory trees. Two years after fluid application, 56% of the trees within the fluid application area were dead.” In a separate study of a drilling operation in West Virginia, severe damage to trees and understory vegetation was observed as a result of accidental aerial release of fluids due to loss of control of the drill bore (USFS Technical Report NRS-76). If such an accident were to occur in tract A-8103, it could devastate the Athens Conservancy’s Bluebell Preserve. The information contained in this and other studies of the direct and indirect effects of horizontal hydrofracturing need to be considered in an Environmental Impact Statement.

Tract A-8103 also borders on the Hockhocking-Adena Bikeway, which is the second biggest tourist attraction in Athens County. Siting of drilling equipment within view of the bikeway, or any accident that resulted in pollution of the water or soil along the bikeway, could have a serious negative economic impact on a region in which tourism is a major source of income. Even if the drilling equipment were located out of view of the bikeway, the noise and odors it produced could decrease the desirability of the bikeway for recreation and thus its ability to attract tourists to the county. The failure to even mention this bikeway in the 2004 Social and Economic Assessment for the Wayne National Forest, in spite of its substantial economic importance to Athens County, is yet another reason why a new EIS is needed before gas/oil leasing is permitted.

Furthermore, water or air pollution resulting from hydraulic fracturing in any of the Athens County tracts, all of which are close to the Hocking River, could have a catastrophic effect on the local

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community. The threat to the water supply for much of Athens County is a grave concern. The only aquifers suitable for public water supplies in our area are the highly permeable glacial outwash deposits along the Hocking River. The clay soils in the surrounding hills cannot produce anywhere near the flow volume needed. Consequently, any drill site near the Hocking River is especially dangerous because a spill of hydrofracturing fluid could find its way into the public water supplies such as those for the cities of Athens and Nelsonville, Ohio University, Hocking College, and the Burr Oak and Le-Ax water systems.

On broader health, environmental, and economic grounds, we object to the permitting of horizontal hydrofracturing on any of the WNF parcels that are being considered for leasing, but we object most strenuously to the inclusion of tract A-8103 in the sale because of the possibility of damage to the forest community in the Athens Conservancy's Bluebell Preserve, as well as possible impact on the Hockhocking-Adena Bikeway and consequently the local economy. Therefore, the Athens Conservancy strongly urges the U.S. Forest Service to prepare an EIS prior to deciding whether to authorize the BLM to lease WNF land for gas and oil drilling.

Sincerely,

  
Donna Goodman, President