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Indiana DNR Plan to Log in the Heart of the Backcountry Area Threatens Popular Brown County Wilderness

Logging Plans Violate Previous Pledges to Maintain Wilderness Character of the Area

(Unionville, IN) – The Indiana Division of Forestry (DOF) recently announced plans to log three adjacent tracts within the Yellowwood State Forest backcountry area totaling 299 acres. The planned cut will impact a favorite hiking trail, the Tecumseh Trail, and will disrupt the habitats of multiple rare wildlife species.

“It’s shocking that our own state government is choosing to cut timber in this species-rich, popular recreation area,” said Jeff Stant, executive director of the Indiana Forest Alliance (IFA). “There is no way that this plan will not destroy the old growth qualities of this forest, which the DOF had committed to preserving.” In 1980, the Department of Natural Resources promised to maintain the natural character of the area when it designated the forest as a “Back Country Area.”

The current plans include logging a remote hollow that contains tulip poplars, sugar maples and northern red oaks between 150 and 200 years old. The cut will include at least 475,200 board feet of timber, and possibly as much as 712,800.

“It breaks my heart to see this beautiful intact public forest sold to the highest bidder,” said Dave Seastrom, who owns property nearby. “We can do better than that in Indiana.”

Wildlife Will Be Impacted

The Indiana Forest Alliance staff is especially familiar with this forest. For four years running, IFA has conducted a comprehensive survey of the flora and fauna in this very area, locating:

- 1) two maternity roosts of the Indiana bat (federally endangered);
- 2) a den containing a mother timber rattlesnake and her young (state endangered);
- 3) families of worm-eating warblers (a bird on the state has listed as a “species of special concern”), and
- 4) smoky shrews (also a state species of special concern) which live only in older undisturbed forests.

Overall, IFA’s Ecoblitz has documented an estimated 3,800 species in the 900 acres of forest surrounding and including the three tracts in question.

“Logging should be kept out of this entire area given the rapid decline of the Indiana Bat toward extinction,” said Stant. “And logging should also be off limits out of respect for hikers and trail users on the Low Gap Trail, one of the most beautiful in our state.”

“The experience of hiking in an older growth forest has no resemblance to walking along a recently logged hillside,” says David Simcox, Ph.D., leader of a new advocacy group called Mind the Gap. Mind the Gap was formed to lobby for the establishment of a 3,700-acre “state wild area” here, protected from logging.

The relative old age of the forest in question makes this planned problematic. Dr. Leslie Bishop, professor emerita of biology from Earlham College and staff scientist for the Indiana Forest Alliance, has been

leading a forest characterization study—meant to document the quality and age of this forest—as part of the survey.

“The project is still in progress, but the research team is already observing and measuring characteristics of old growth forest: big old trees in a mixed age stand with multiple canopy layers and woody debris in all stages of decay.”

In 2015, top botanists assessed the floristic quality of the plant community in a part of the to-be-logged area. Floristic quality includes how natural and undistributed a forest is measured by how few invasive plants are present vs. how many native plants are present. Dr. Paul Rothrock, Associate Curator of Biology at Indiana University, and Dr. Don Ruch, professor of biology at Ball State University and past President of the Indiana Academy of Science found this tract to be one of the highest and most pristine ever measured for a hardwood forest in Indiana, stating that this forest “has very high ‘remnant natural value,’ perhaps the highest in the State.”

Long-Term Loss

“The forest provides important ecosystem services such as nutrient cycling, healthy soil development, and carbon storage that directly affect people in Monroe and Brown Counties,” said Dr. Bishop. “The long-term benefits of preserving large tracts of mature forests for both the health of the forest and for biodiversity far surpass the short-term gain of a timber sale.”

Forest advocate Simcox is also concerned about the logging’s impact on the nearby Lake Lemon watershed. “The Lake Lemon Conservation District is now looking at spending at least \$4.5 million to remove the sediment from the lake, while the DNR continues to aggressively log in that watershed.”

A DNR staffer claimed on the IFA Facebook page that “harvesting will not remove all the trees nor convert it to non-forest.”

But that’s still unacceptable to anyone who has experienced one of the most beautiful old forests remaining in our state forest system. “These forests take 100 years or more to recover for the last onslaught,” says Simcox. “Do DNR officials really think this will not affect the hiking and camping community?”

Anyone wishing to speak out against the logging is encouraged to call Governor Holcomb’s office at 317-232-4567 and/or to make an official comment on the Division of Forestry’s logging plans at <http://www.in.gov/dnr/forestry/8122.htm> before September 3.

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ABOUT THE INDIANA FOREST ALLIANCE

IFA is a non-profit, statewide organization founded in 1996 and dedicated to preserving and restoring Indiana’s native hardwood forest ecosystem for the enjoyment of all. Through expert research, influential advocacy, effective organizing, powerful storytelling, and when necessary, litigation, IFA ensures that the integrity of Indiana’s forest ecosystem thrives as a natural resource to benefit native wildlife, soil, air and water quality; and as the emblem of our natural heritage. By leading a coalition of citizens, organizations and decision makers, IFA establishes, protects, and restores forests for future generations.