

Press Release

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Residents Propose New Indiana State Parks Along Salamonie and Mississinewa Rivers

More than 750* concerned residents are calling for Salamonie River and Frances Slocum State Forests to be designated as Indiana State Parks in a petition to the Indiana Natural Resources Commission (INRC). Several residents who live near these state forests are planning to deliver signed petitions supported by a case statement to the INRC Office of Hearings in Indianapolis Thursday, April 25. They also plan to submit copies of the petition to Governor Eric Holcomb, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, and Indiana legislators whose districts include these state forests.

Residents are filing for a rule change that would transfer oversight of both forests to the Division of State Parks and Reservoirs within the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) from the Division of Forestry (DoF). In doing so, these properties would become Indiana's 26th and 27th state parks.

“We are asking for this change in designation because publicly accessible forested areas intended for outdoor recreation are very limited in northern Indiana,” said Kathryn Lisinicchia, speaking in behalf of Friends of Salamonie Forest. “Creating state parks in Salamonie and Frances Slocum will bring more tourist dollars to this part of the state while protecting the pristine beauty in these forests for the enjoyment of all.”

Jeannie Mikesell, a nurse at Marion General Hospital, also sees the benefit of increased outdoor recreation.

“The health benefits of forests are well known,” said Mikesell. “Spending time outside in forests is good for people—forests help reduce stress and lower blood pressure. Moreover, hiking the forest trails in Salamonie and Frances Slocum is great exercise which improves the health of folks in our community.”

Not only do residents see the health benefits of forests, but some have also expressed concern about the ecological integrity of these forests if they are not protected and the wildlife they support. Salamonie and Frances Slocum provide an island of habitat to many mammal and bird species in a part of the state where much of the surrounding area is now farmland. Bird watchers often outnumber the birds they're following.

Fort Wayne resident, Hannah Berz, a regular hiker in Salamonie, values every opportunity she can get to walk through the undisturbed forest along the Salamonie River.

“Very few areas like Salamonie and Frances Slocum exist anymore, said Berz. “Where else can I go to see dozens of bald eagles in one place in the early spring? Why would we decide to cut down the trees those eagles roost in?”

These forests are being damaged by unregulated horse traffic, but residents fear that damage would pale in comparison to proposed logging. The Division of Forestry is reportedly moving forward on its plans to sell 31% or nearly 1/3 of the mature trees from 120 acres in the heart of Salamonie State Forest next month. The Division of Forestry also plans to sell 32% of the mature trees in a 97-acre tract of Frances Slocum State Forest in the near future. That tract which covers half of the State Forest’s land along the Mississinewa River is frequented by roosting and migrating bald eagles. By creating these state parks, these forests would continue to grow into an old-growth condition that is notably absent from northern Indiana.

What too often is forgotten when considering Indiana’s diminishing ecological heritage is the value of these forests to Indiana’s native peoples.

“It is important to recognize the rich Native American history embodied within these forests,” said Rochester resident and film maker, Susan Green. “Designating them as State Parks would serve and protect numerous sites especially within Frances Slocum State Forest. Frances Slocum and 21 of her Miami relatives were exempted from removal by the United States Congress in 1846. Her Miami relations form the nucleus of the present-day Miami Nation of Indiana. It is an unprecedented opportunity to honor and preserve the little-known Native history of Indiana for Hoosiers, now and for future generations.”

In designating both areas as state parks, residents want improved management of these areas, such as the removal of invasive, nonnative plants, better trail access, more regulation of harmful, off-trail use, more eagle-watching sites, and a commitment from the state for improved management of both of these forests that would allow trees to grow to their full lifespan and evolve naturally without human interference.

**More than 870 residents have now signed the petition. (April 26, 2019)*