

# Hydraulic Fracturing on Eastern National Forests: A Growing Threat

A Presentation Proposal by

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- Why is hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, occurring on eastern national forests?
- What is the environmental impact of drilling on these forests?
- How does the history of the eastern forests explain why fracking is being permitted?
- Finally—should fracking on public lands be regulated, or should it be stopped?

Those are the questions that I will address in an hourlong presentation accompanied by a Power Point presentation that shows oil and natural-gas drilling and the environmental impact of those technologies on eastern national forests.

The presentation grows out of a new book that I have co-authored: *Forests for the People: The Story of America's Eastern National Forests*. I wrote it with David Govatski, a former forester who leads conservation initiatives in New Hampshire.

*Forests for the People* has an entire chapter on hydraulic fracturing in eastern national forests. The focus is on the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania, where fracking has already started.

In March 2012, I visited the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania to do research.

Guiding me were two members of the Allegheny Defense Project: Cathy Pedler, the Forest Watch Coordinator, and Bill Belitskus, the president of the board of directors.

We spent the entire day in the forest, investigating several of the *11,000* conventional well sites. Every few hundred yards, we passed pumpjacks bringing oil to the surface and enormous trucks chewing up gravel roads and as they carried oil away.

Now fracking for natural gas is coming to this forest—and other national forests in the Midwest, East, and South. As we hiked, we saw sites that clearly were being prepared for fracking. At each site, five acres of forest had been cleared, thousands of feet of pipe had been stacked, and tanks had been built to hold the highly contaminated water that is a byproduct of this process.

Conventional oil drilling is already a problem on several national forests, and the threat of fracking will only make the problems worse. Already, citizens have banded together to oppose fracking on national forests in Virginia, West Virginia, Mississippi, and Alabama.

In my presentation, I will explain how citizens in the past banded together to protect eastern national forests, why these forests remain vulnerable, and why hydraulic fracturing is such a threat to forest ecosystems.

### Part I: Devastation of Forests a Century Ago

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, America faced an enormous ecological crisis: the devastation of the forests that had once carpeted the East, the South, and the Midwest. Heavy logging and massive forest fires were responsible for the destruction. In 1871, for example, the Great Peshtigo Fire in northern Wisconsin killed 1,500 people and destroyed millions of trees. Fires burned hundreds of thousands of acres in other forests.

### Part II: The Weeks Act and the Split Estate

Americans who loved the outdoors were alarmed by the growing devastation. Armed with emerging scientific knowledge about forests, a determined group of conservationists launched efforts to save the forests.

They informed the public—and Congress—about what was happening. Finally, in 1911, their efforts led to the passage of the Weeks Act, which gave the federal government the right and the resources to buy forestlands for the purpose of protecting them.

Yet even with the Weeks Act, private companies still controlled mineral rights on many eastern forests, setting the stage for continued mining and drilling.

### Part III: Restoring the Eastern National Forests

Armed with the Weeks Act and other key laws, America undertook the huge task of restoring its eastern forests. Citizen volunteers, professional foresters, and government agencies all contributed to this valiant effort.

One agency alone, the Civilian Conservation Corps, planted millions of trees. Restored forests breathed new life into rivers and streams. Eroded lands returned to health. By the 1950s, once-devastated forests were flourishing.

### Part IV: Drilling for Oil and Natural Gas on Allegheny National Forest

Despite this miraculous restoration effort, eastern national forests still face severe threats today. As a case study, I will examine Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest, which faces serious environmental problems from drilling for oil and natural gas. The forest has more than 11,000 conventional oil wells, resulting in forest fragmentation, erosion, sedimentation, and air pollution.

The threat of hydraulic fracturing will only worsen the damage. The technology almost certainly will contaminate water, increase erosion, ruin wildlife habitat, cause air pollution, and interfere with recreational use of the forest. It will also draw off millions of gallons of water from pristine rivers and streams. Is this how we want *our* national forests used?

### Part V: Steps to Protect the Eastern National Forests

Concerned citizens have come together to oppose fracking and accelerated conventional drilling in eastern national forests. In 2009, for example, citizens in Virginia succeeded in stopping plans for hydraulic fracturing on the George Washington National Forest. Opponents have also challenged plans for hydraulic fracturing in national forests in Alabama, West Virginia, and other regions. Their efforts to stop fracking are highly instructive.