

Groups want to stop Cheat River logging

By Paul J. Nyden
Staff writer

Allegheny Wood Products, based in Petersburg, has begun building logging roads, cutting trees and planning other logging activities in the Cheat River Canyon. That scenic river begins near Albright in Preston County and flows into the Cheat Lake near Morgantown in Monongalia County.

Six environmental groups are now looking into the possibility of filing a citizens' lawsuit in early December, seeking to enforce provisions of the Endangered Species Act to block Allegheny Wood Products from logging in the area.

Judy Rodd, director of Friends of Blackwater, said on Monday that she heard reports over the weekend that "logging trucks are now hauling logs out of the Cheat River Canyon near Albright. They are not just opening up a trail, but actually logging in this endangered species habitat.

"They should not have built a logging road in this remote, undisturbed canyon, which is similar to Blackwater Canyon. It is used by whitewater rafters, by hikers and by bikers," Rodd said. "The company has built a road through the middle of the Allegheny Trail, which was established 20 years ago. That trail goes from the Virginia state line in Monroe County up to Pennsylvania. Allegheny Wood Products is turning it into a haul road for logging trucks."

A woman who answered the phone at Allegheny Wood Products on Monday said that John W. Crites, the company's president, and Donna Record, a company spokeswoman, were out of the office this week and unavailable for comment.

Allegheny Wood Products bought land in Cheat Canyon from Allegheny Power. In cooperation with several conservation groups, the state of West Virginia had raised \$9 million to buy the whole canyon and make it into a park. "Even though the state made a higher offer than Allegheny Wood Products," Rodd said, "the power company decided to sell it to Allegheny Wood Products."

Tom Chapman, who works for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Elkins, said Monday, "I am aware of the situation. But because of the [legal] nature of this situation, I must refer you to our regional office." Marty Miller, a spokesman for the Fish and Wildlife Service's regional offices in Hadley, Mass., did not return two telephone calls to his offices on Monday afternoon.

On Sept. 30, Friends of Blackwater and five other outdoors groups filed a 60-day notice with the U.S. Interior Department stating a possible intention to file a suit to prevent AWP from destroying the natural habitat of two endangered species: Cheat flat-spined three-toothed snails and Indiana bats.

The other groups signing the letter were: the Center for Biological Diversity, West Virginia Rivers Coalition, Cheat Lake Environment and Recreation Association, West Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club and Coopers Rock Foundation.

Ken Hotopp, a biologist who heads the Appalachian Conservation Biology in Frostburg, Md., sent a detailed letter to Friends of Blackwater on Sept. 17, stating the area now threatened by logging is the only area in the world where the endangered snails are found. Hotopp's research found one-third of the habitat for the three-toothed snail is on land in the Cheat Canyon owned by AWP.

In the past, Hotopp has done scientific research for the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Allegheny Energy and Allegheny Wood Products itself.

On Monday, Erin Tobin and Eric Glitzenstein, two Washington, D.C., lawyers representing the six outdoors groups, sent the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service a letter challenging a recent agency statement that it did not "have any reports confirming harm of any federally listed species" in the Cheat Canyon.

Monday's letter said the agency failed to "address our concerns about take [killing of endangered snails and bats] that has likely occurred and will likely continue to occur on Allegheny Wood Products' property." The letter asked the Fish and Wildlife Service, part of the U.S. Interior Department, "to take immediate action to investigate AWP's past and proposed activities, and to initiate appropriate enforcement activities."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office in Elkins, Rodd said, has not even sent out a single observer to see what AWP loggers are doing in the Cheat Canyon. "This is an illegal action," she added. "Why is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service not enforcing the law?"

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