

SPARTA TOWNSHIP COUNCIL, MANAGER AND PLANNING BOARD

SPARTA TOWNSHIP ENVIRONMENTAL COMMISSION

JANUARY 29, 2016

FOREST STEWARDSHIP PLAN

SPARTA MOUNTAIN WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

On December 24, 2015, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) released the Forest Stewardship Plan ("Plan") proposed for Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA). We understand that the comment period for the Plan has been extended to February 16, 2016. Of the 3,461 acres MUA, 1,842 acres are located in Sparta Township. Therefore, the Plan may significantly impact residents of Sparta and should be thoroughly evaluated by the Township of Sparta. However, with the NJDEP choosing to release the report immediately prior to the Christmas and New Year Holiday, it is likely that many residents have not had an opportunity to review and digest the report. One of the best ways to allow all residents of Sparta to opine on the Forest Stewardship Plan ("Plan") is to request that the NJDEP hold a Public Hearing in Sparta. Based on a preliminary review of the Plan, the Sparta Township Environmental Commission has identified several concerns on how the Plan impacts Sparta Township, both with regard to the quality of life for residents, as well as the environmental setting of the Sparta Mountain WMA. This memo lists some of these concerns that we believe the Town Council should consider in their request for a Public Hearing:

Impacts to Sparta Township Residents

The Plan proposes logging of the property in an attempt to create different serial stages of forest community. However the Plan is not clear as to what steps will be taken to protect residents living in the vicinity of the WMA. For instance:

- What will be the hours of operation of logging equipment;
- What equipment will be used? What sound levels are expected of the equipment? Assuming logging will include chain saws, logging trucks, feller/bunchers, and other heavy equipment to pull trees from the forest, the cumulative noise impacts could be substantial.
- What roads will be utilized to remove the logs? Will there be impacts to residential roads? The Plan does imply that Edison Road will be utilized. Specifically, what are the truck traffic patterns through Sparta? If there is damage to the roads, who will be

accountable? What resources are available to monitor any damage and make prompt repairs? This should not be an obligation of the Township.

- What measures are being taken to avoid and or minimize impacts to neighboring residential areas? The Plan is unclear where some of the proposed timber cuts are located, but heavy equipment can impact surface runoff and increase sedimentation.
- The Plan provides no discussion of how or where roads may be built to provide access to remote portions of the track. How does the Plan propose to protect public roads from mud and debris? How will these logging roads be removed and restored?
- The Plan indicates that Sparta Mountain WMA has minimal invasive plant concerns. However, it does not indicate how the logging activities will be conducted to ensure that invasive plants are not introduced into the WMA and surrounding residential areas. Will equipment entering the WMA be inspected and be cleaned prior to entering the site?
- What steps will be taken to prevent contamination of the WMA water courses that traverse other parts of Sparta. For instance, heavy equipment is notorious for hydraulic line ruptures and fuel spills. What plan is in place to avoid and clean up these contaminants? Who will oversee that proper spill containment is enforced? Again, this should not be an obligation of the Township.
- How does the Plan propose to avoid minimizing impacts to recreational users of the WMA? The logging plan will introduce noise impacts and air quality issues resulting from diesel emissions from logging equipment. Will the Plan result in trail closure? If no trail closures are proposed, how will the Plan protect hikers, birdwatchers, hunters, trappers, and all the other visitors to the WMA? Will the Plan result in restricted access to the WMA?

Environmental Concerns

The Plan implies that it is designed to enhance wildlife habitat in the WMA. However, aside from focusing on a few species, the Plan is vague on the overall improvement to the WMA. For example:

- The plan lists 42 species of rare, threatened and endangered wildlife species that may occur in the WMA. However, it does not indicate if any studies have been conducted to determine which species actually occur on the WMA. The Plan spends extensive discussion on managing habitats for the State endangered Golden-winged warbler. But is cursory in its discussion, particularly with regard to whether the Plan will improve habitat for the other species.
- The Plan lists potential habitat for the federally protected Indiana bat, bog turtle, and small whorled Pogonia. It does not discuss the recently listed federally threatened northern long-eared bat. How will the Plan address the recently issued 4(d) rule that states that impacts will not occur to known maternity trees or trees located within 150 feet of maternity trees? There is no indication that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has opined on whether they agree that the Plan will not result in impacts to these species.

- The Plan should provide results of site specific studies of which species occur within the WMA proposed for impact. Limited plant surveys appear to have been conducted, but no surveys for wildlife. A note indicates that bat surveys were to be conducted in 2015, but the results not provided. Has the NJDEP Endangered and Non Game Species Program (ENSP) biologists been involved in the preparation of the Plan? No comments or reports are cited that indicate that their expertise has been solicited or received. This Plan, is designed to improve wildlife habitat, appears to have been prepared by “NJ Approved Foresters”.
- The Plan indicates that clearing may occur at any time of the year. What measures will be taken to avoid impacts to ground nesting birds, reptiles and amphibians? For example the Plan states that no cutting will occur along wood turtle streams. However, wood turtles spend most of the summer and fall in upland terrestrial habitats. The Plan states that care will be taken along access road to look for snakes. Many snakes have extremely cryptic coloring. Who will ensure that snakes can be protected?
- If a developer was to construct access roads and cut trees, they would be subject to significant limitations by the NJDEP as to the time of year they could work in threatened and endangered species habitat. They would have stringent techniques to prevent soil erosion and sedimentation into on-site wetlands and streams, they would be required to conduct extensive wildlife studies prior to starting work. Shouldn't the NJDEP be held to the same standard of care?

Finally, the Plan contains elements of an economic development proposal. It states that the selected management activities are recommended based on ecological activities, however, there are also opportunities to generate revenue. The Plan further states that to not consider the monetary value of public lands is both “irresponsible” and “a violation of the public trust”. Lastly, the Plan argues that the recommended approach promotes “green jobs”. (To our knowledge, this is the first instance of a state agency asserting that logging jobs equate to “green” jobs and are therefore desirable from an environmental perspective.)

These statements raise significant questions about the intent of this Plan. The Commission strongly believes that public lands are to be managed for public access, natural resource protection and ecological preservation. The economic worth of these lands is incidental to their overall value and should not be a factor in their management.

In summary, the Sparta Mountain WMA was purchased by Green Acres and is to be managed for the preservation and enhancement of wildlife habitat, not forest products. However, the Plan was prepared by two foresters and seems to focus on the board feet of wood that can be removed from the property. Since there are significant questions as to how this Plan will impact Sparta Township and its residents, the Environmental Commission requests that the Town Council request that the NJDEP come to Sparta to address the concerns of Sparta residents. Thank you for your consideration of this request.