

Sparta Mountain WMA-Weldon Brook WMA: Similar Objective with Different Outcomes

In the 1990's, the surrounding communities celebrated the establishment of Sparta Mountain WMA and nearby Weldon Brook WMA. Both properties protect critical habitat and provide high conservation value services for the State of New Jersey. NJDEP developed Forest Stewardship Plans (FSPs) compliant with Forest Stewardship Council guidelines with similar goals, objectives, and treatment plans incorporating "Young Forest" creation for Golden Winged Warbler and preference for "oak" forest regeneration. The Weldon Brook WMA FSP was adopted relatively without much fanfare. The Sparta Mountain WMA FSP has sparked an uprising and is still not finalized. What was different?

Weldon Brook's planning approach is grounded on scientific analysis whereas Sparta Mountain's emphasis is on generating revenue. The Highlands Coalition's comments expose this difference. Regarding Weldon Brook WMA the Highlands Coalitions bestowed accolades:

"Overall, the Weldon Brook Wildlife Management Area Forest Stewardship Plan (FSP) is one of the more thorough and complete FSPs developed for an NJDEP holding that several members of the NJ Highlands Coalition can recall reviewing. The plan gives ample consideration to rare and declining species including Golden-winged Warbler and Indiana Bat. The plan does a good job of outlining and considering the relevant conservation actions and strategies described in the NJ State Wildlife Action Plan and Forest Action Plan. The plan appears to adhere to the inclusion of many Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) recommended management plan elements. Considering how closely the plan follows FSC guidelines, we encourage the NJDEP to get the plan FSC approved and certified".

In regards to the Sparta Mountain WMA, The Highlands Coalition's words were quite harsh:

"A proposed management activity for any habitat, forest or otherwise, must be designed based on what action (or inaction) is best to accomplish a desired outcome, and then funding to accomplish those actions should be sought. ... But in this instance, the Plan sets the stewardship of SMWMA down the path of an economics-driven, agricultural system based on deriving income to pay for activities. This is not a "10-year Plan," but rather the first installment of a multi-decade, economic enterprise."

There are other disturbing differences. The Weldon Plan minimizes disturbance of vernal pools by including them in a designated area for "Old Growth" Forest. It, maintains a 628 acre Golden Winged Warbler Habitat cutting 37 acres every four years. Wetland/ setbacks are similar to Highlands Counsel recommendations. The Sparta Mountain Plan uses minimum wetland setbacks does not identify any area reserved for "Old Growth Forest, and proposes clear cuts in stands with vernal pools. These major disturbances result in **impairment** of the environment and are detrimental to species reliant on a closed canopy. These species cannot be replaces. Clear cuts also impair the ability of the forest to retain water. Other clear cuts planned along powerline right of ways result in undesired **fragmentation**.

Lastly, lake community homes are interspersed, within the boundaries of, Sparta Mountain WMA. Controlled burn, chemical applications, heavy equipment, buzzing chain saws, and the roar of ATV's on abandoned logging roads aren't welcomed.