

SUMMER BOARD MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

On July 21, the Board of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy met at Old Hemlock, a historic house in northern Preston County.

President Cindy Ellis appointed a nominating committee of Cindy Rank, Larry Thomas, and Hugh Rogers. She encouraged members to suggest names for candidates for positions to be filled at our annual meeting on October 28.

Cindy, Marilyn Shoenfeld, and Buff Rodman had begun planning a Fall Review for that weekend at Canaan Valley State Park. The theme will be wind energy and eagles. Representatives of WVU's Golden Eagle wintering grounds monitoring program will be with us, along with Kelly Fuller from the American Bird Conservancy.

News of the serious illness of Bob Burrell, a founding member of the Highlands Conservancy, prompted us to recall Bob's dedication and many-faceted service. Bob died on the following Monday.

Cindy reported on the West Virginia Land Study, an effort to completely update a 30-year-old study. It will document patterns of property ownership and taxation and their impacts on state and local economies. We are reminded that West Virginia ranks at the bottom on measures of government transparency. Cindy was on a recent conference call to review progress of the study with representatives of Alliance for Appalachia, WVU Extension Service, American Friends Service Committee, WV Center on Budget and Policy, Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, Keepers of the Mountains, Coal River Mountain Watch, and Citizens Action Group.

Mike Withers commented that there are more acres in "managed timberland" than in all types of public land combined. The land companies lease these holdings to private hunting clubs, a lucrative arrangement for them, limiting access to a very few people. We should take a hard look at this tax break. Opening the lands to public recreation would provide some public benefit in exchange for the cost to county treasuries. Most of the corporate owners are from out of state.

Membership Secretary Beth Little reported that the web site is by far our chief recruitment tool. Our Webmaster, Jim Solley, wants to train a backup-and-successor to run all our web business. Beth had some people in mind and she will continue to explore this.

Meanwhile, our Facebook page is "cooking": in a short time we've gone from 74 to 500+ "friends," and 34,000+ "like" us. Most "hits" have to do with coal and Canaan Valley. For a more precisely targeted outreach, Cindy E. displayed a model for the "I [heart] Mountains" onesie (it has a subtitle, "Save One for Me").

Treasurer Bob Marshall annotated the budget spreadsheet at the halfway point of our year. We are doing well, considering the overall economy. Balsam/Spruce funds expected from the federal government (such as seedling purchases by Forest Service or Wildlife Refuge) come in slowly but surely. Now we've wiped out the negative carryover from last year and we're well ahead for this year. Bob said we've sold almost the entire inventory of the Hiking Guide and plan to reprint about 2,000 copies later this year.

Mining committee chair Cindy Rank briefly summarized

continuing activities. We're involved in the lawsuit complaining of power plant coal ash dumped on old mine sites. Office of Surface Mining (OSM) is reconsidering how it deals with the coal ash exception to EPA regulation of toxic wastes. The older, simple-minded view was that ash is alkaline so it balances acid drainage. Evan Hansen and Downstream Strategies are researching the real effects.

On Spruce #1, EPA's appeal has been filed and we along with our allies will file an amicus brief in support. On selenium, there are plenty of culprits besides the companies with whom we recently signed multi-million-dollar settlements. We are suing them. With our organizational member TEAM, we're supporting Downstream Strategies water quality monitoring around the new longwall mines in Taylor County. Cindy is working with Citizens Coal Council on the proposed reorganization of OSM and Bureau of Land Management within the Department of Interior. Finally, Cindy noted coal trends: steam coal producers are laying off miners; met coal sales are rising.

On gas drilling, Beth Little reported that the Sierra Club has invited Monogahela National Forest Superintendent Clyde Thompson and Planner David Ede to explain their RONI (predicting *no* impact, and thus more sweeping than a FONSI, which claims no *significant* impact) on gas drilling in the Forest. Anyway, what control does the Forest Service have where it doesn't own the minerals? A recent court decision on the Allegheny National Forest stopped that agency from doing an Environmental Impact Study on proposed drilling. Sierra Club lawyers are working on the issue across the border in Ohio, and they will share their research.

In the Gauley District, one company surveyed for a pipeline but then pulled out—perhaps discouraged by low gas prices. No other area in the Mon has seen such interest. However, in the Forest around Richwood private ownership of mineral rights is common. Beth recalled the frenzy of private land leasing in Pocahontas County in 2008. Most leases were written for a 5-year period. Before next year, companies will do everything they can to keep them alive. Beth and her colleagues got WVU's Extension Service to sponsor a workshop with attorney Bill Thurman of Buckhannon on the issues involved in lease renewals and/or expirations. Comments on the new Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) regulations on fracking were due July 31.

By legislation, county water resource plans are due next year. Most counties are way behind schedule. At the following week's interims, the DEP was supposed to report on progress. Would the legislators dig into agency ineptitude? Pocahontas, an exceptional county in Beth's experience (and in part *because of* her experience) hired Downstream Strategies as a consultant and a local VISTA has been coordinating and publicizing.

Further on public lands, Don Gasper reported that the WV Land Trust has a growing fund (from consent decrees in selenium cases) available to retire development rights and buy land outright. He recommended purchases in several drainages.

(Continued on the next page)

