

Synopsis of local efforts by the Friends of Mountaintown to protect Georgia's largest roadless area.

Mountaintown refers to the headwaters of Mountaintown Creek in Gilmer County, Georgia

- ▶ The Mountaintown area, some 13,000 acres, is steep, difficult to traverse, and the headwaters for Mountaintown Creek, one of Georgia's premier trout streams, along with several other notable fishing streams. Local folks have historically hunted and fished the area and the natural qualities of the area increasingly attracts Georgians for recreation. The nationally renowned Benton MacKaye trail follows the high Tennessee Divide for seven miles through the eastern portion of the area and the Mountaintown Creek trail winds back and forth across its namesake stream for over 5 miles. This beautiful area is Georgia's largest roadless area on the national forest.
- ▶ Between 1997-2004 the Forest Service studied Mountaintown for seven years during their Land & Resource Management planning process. For five of those years the area was placed in a "Wilderness Study" prescription leading most citizens to believe the FS would recommend the area for Wilderness legislation.
- ▶ During the forest planning process 90 plus percent of the public input affirmed Georgian's desires to have more wilderness designations
- ▶ When public input ceased the Forest Service downgraded Mountaintown to a category without the protection of Wilderness. Public outcry asking for explanations went unanswered.
- ▶ Local support swelled, as interested individuals and groups began to rally, because of past poor FS management methods in our area and disappointment over the Forest Plan outcome. We have seen streams destroyed, as logging roads silted into them. In an area close to Mountaintown, the logging roads cost the government more than was realized by the sale of the timber and destroyed the streams.
- ▶ At one of his regular town hall meetings in Gilmer County, Congressman Nathan Deal (R-10th district) heard, possibly for the first time, of the growing local interest for protecting the area. He asked for a show of hands of support for protection. The majority of the people raised their hands.
- ▶ Approximately 20 letters were sent to the congressman and senators in support of a Wilderness designation. A petition with 900 signatures was also delivered.
- ▶ The city councils of both Ellijay and East Ellijay, the two towns in Gilmer County, voted unanimously to support resolutions calling for a Mountaintown Wilderness bill.
- ▶ A public meeting in Gilmer with the Congressman and several Senate staffers was held at Col. Poole's to a packed audience. The only negative comments to Wilderness were from some mountain bikers, who did not want to lose a mountain bike trail, located in the Mountaintown area. Local businessmen and leaders spoke out for protection.

- ▶ At the request of Congressman Deal, Kathleen Atkinson, Forest Supervisor and 5 members of the Forest Service came to Gilmer County for a public meeting. No resolution was reached with the Forest Service staunchly defending its position.
- ▶ Continued meetings with Congressman Deal and Chief of Staff Chris Riley over the following two years resulted in Friends of Mountaintown suggesting a lower level of protection for the area: a National Scenic Area.
- ▶ At Representative Deal's request, representatives of FOM met with several members of the Forest Service at their Gainesville office to further discuss the issue. Had a very positive meeting. We left there believing we had an understanding.
- ▶ **Six months** later, the Forest Service gave their amended language to Congressman Deal. It was basically what they had recommended two years earlier, i.e., very little protection and would make our Scenic designation worthless.
- ▶ Met again with Congressman Deal and Chief Staffer Chris Riley who asked about our position on salvage logging, which we do not oppose, if it makes sense, and fire suppression, which we do not oppose. We all concurred on the language which he and GA House representative Charlie Norwood co-sponsored and introduced to the appropriate House committees. This bill HR 5612 would protect the 13,000 acre Mountaintown area plus 8,000+ acres of additions to existing wilderness recommended in the new Forest Management Plan.
- ▶ Met with Frank Redmond and Ash Miller in Ellijay to explain our position on the issue and ask for help from our senators.
- ▶ September 2006, 2 Friends of Mountaintown meet with both US House Representatives and staff of both GA senators to discuss the House Bill and request the Senators support and introduction of the same language in the Senate Agriculture committee.
- ▶ January 2007, Congressman Deal reintroduces bill as HR 707.
- ▶ June 2007, House Resource committee accepts HR 707 for a hearing but no date set.
- ▶ November 2007, Congressman Deal decides to withdraw HR 707 as submitted, deleting the wilderness additions portion of the bill. The following day, he reintroduces the bill as HR 4092, consisting of only the 13,000-acre Mountaintown National Scenic Area. It is believed that this action makes our bill more acceptable to important decision makers.

Friends of Mountaintown representatives;

Beth Pigott
Chuck Handte
David Govus
Dave Cherry
Wayne Jenkins

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