COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
HOUSE OF DELEGATES
RICHMOND

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COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENTS:
COURTS OF JUSTICE
HEALTH, WELFARE AND INSTITUTIONS
MILITIA, POLICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY

January 28, 2014

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Jamie L. Whitten Building
Suite 200A
Washington, DC 20250
agsec@usda.gov

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

As a member of the Virginia House of Delegates who represents thousands of constituents in Arlington County, I write to urge you to prohibit horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing in the George Washington National Forest.

I understand that you are finalizing a land and resource management plan that could allow horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing for natural gas in the Marcellus shale that lies beneath the forest. At least some of these potential drilling sites are located in or near areas that contain headwaters of the Potomac River on which my constituents depend for drinking water along with millions of others in the Washington, DC metro area. We share the concerns of our local public water providers including Fairfax Water, DC Water and the Washington Aqueduct that this type of drilling could contaminate the Potomac and should not be allowed, at least until more scientific information is developed to know whether it can be done safely.

Though we must conduct more research to know the full extent of risks from hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling, there is mounting evidence that the process is inherently risky. The Forest Service predicts that if horizontal drilling is allowed in the forest, up to five million gallons of fluid will be injected into each natural gas well for hydraulic fracturing. This fluid will likely contain toxic and unknown chemicals protected as trade secrets. The recent chemical spill in West Virginia showed how dangerous it can be to use dangerous and largely unknown chemicals near drinking water supplies.

The Forest Service estimates that each well will generate at least hundreds of thousands of gallons of wastewater that must be disposed of. This wastewater could contain the toxic and unknown chemicals injected in the hydraulic fracturing process as well as high levels of naturally-occurring radioactive contaminants. The U.S. Geological Survey has found that the

Marcellus shale is naturally radioactive and that the water from Marcellus shale gas drilling operations contains high levels of radium, a carcinogen. If this wastewater leaks, spills or is otherwise discharged into the Potomac's tributaries, it could pose risks to water quality for local residents and our community downstream. There are also unanswered questions about what happens to fluid that is injected underground in hydraulic fracturing and whether there can be connections between underground contaminants and surface water.

These risks are not just hypothetical. Last September, Pennsylvania's Attorney General filed criminal charges against XTO Energy Corp., a subsidiary of Exxon Mobil Corp., for a spill of more than 50,000 gallons of toxic drilling wastewater in 2010 that contaminated a spring and a tributary of the Susquehanna River. XTO settled civil charges for the incident in July without admitting liability by agreeing to improve its wastewater management and pay a $100,000 fine. In 2011, the New York Times reported that natural gas drilling companies in Pennsylvania's portion of the Marcellus shale transported millions of gallons of radioactive wastewater to sewage treatment plants, some of which were unequipped to treat the fluids. The plants then discharged the fluids into rivers, in some cases just upstream from drinking water intakes. Drilling companies, themselves, routinely disclose to their investors "inherent" risks of drilling including leaks, spills and environmental damage.

In addition to water quality impacts, I am concerned that the highly industrial nature of the horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing process is incompatible with the George Washington National Forest that draws more than a million people each year for recreation. The Forest Service predicts up to 4,400 truck trips per three-well pad if horizontal drilling is allowed in the forest. This type of traffic, the related road construction and inevitable spills of drilling fluids are likely to transform parts of a scenic forest and surrounding communities into industrial zones.

Finally, exemptions that the oil and natural gas industry enjoys from the Safe Drinking Water Act, Clean Water Act and other federal environmental laws including those requiring safe handling of hazardous waste and public disclosure of toxic chemicals do not inspire confidence that regulation could protect water quality and other natural resources if horizontal drilling were allowed.

For these reasons, I urge the Forest Service to prohibit horizontal drilling in the George Washington National Forest. Please contact me if you have any questions or if I can provide additional information.

Sincerely,

Patrick A. Hope

cc: Elizabeth Agpaoa, Southern Regional Forester, USDA Forest Service