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## WILDERNESS AND FOREST STEWARDSHIP COMPATIBLE

A number of Free Press My Turns have addressed the recently released draft management plan for Vermont's Green Mountain National Forest. A central issue has been the proposal to add new wilderness areas to the roughly 60,000 acres on the Green Mountain National Forest previously designated.

Trade groups representing the timber industry in Vermont are on record opposing any additional wilderness designations. On the other side are conservation groups who have proposed about 100,000 acres for new wilderness designation. The management alternative preferred by the Forest Service recommends just under 18,000 acres; another alternative (not preferred by the agency) would add close to 50,000 acres. Is there a middle ground on the wilderness issue? The answer is yes.

Consider this: on the Green Mountain National Forest there is no reason for wilderness designations to be mutually exclusive of an active timber harvest program. In fact, the Forest Service's projected timber harvest levels differ only slightly between the 18,000 and 50,000 acre alternatives. Under the former, 49 percent of the forest remains open for logging (with an average annual harvest of 16.8 million board feet) compared to 45 percent left in the suitable timber base (annual harvest of 16.0 million board feet) under the latter. The difference could be wiped out were a 50,000 acre alternative crafted with a slightly more active timber harvest approach. This could employ, for instance, broader use of less intensive forestry practices that maintain mature forest wildlife habitats.

I believe in maintaining an active timber program on national forest

### My Turn William S. Keeton

lands, for both economic and ecological reasons. Forest Service data suggest that we can carefully harvest timber in an ecologically sound manner while also 1. providing opportunities for non-motorized and motorized recreation, such as snowmobiling; and 2. substantially increasing the proportion of the Green Mountain National Forest in wilderness. All-terrain vehicle use of public lands is highly questionable given the track record of non-compliance with trail regulations.

There are compelling scientific reasons to stress wilderness more heavily than it has been in the past. I will point out just a couple of them. First, based on my own research experience I can attest to the fact that wilderness areas provide scientific "controls" that simply are not provided elsewhere on the landscape. Wilderness areas help us learn how forest ecosystems change and work in the absence of human manipulation. This has been invaluable for improving the way we do forestry on the rest of the landscape. For this we need multiple, large areas as representative as possible of the region's ecological diversity.

The second argument should resonate strongly with foresters. In my view wilderness areas give us more flexibility, not less, in managing forests. One can be pro management and pro wilderness. We just have to look at the big picture. A comprehensive reserve system gives us a margin of safety, a hedge on our bet that we really know what we are doing in managed forests in the face of long-term change and an uncertain

future. Vermont's forest ecosystems are incredibly resilient. But as human populations increase in this region -- and perhaps if the climate changes -- that resiliency will be sorely tested. There are few scientists who disagree with the notion that reserves help to increase ecological resiliency in many ways, such as by harboring populations of organisms.

Some will wonder why these reserves have to be passively managed wilderness. The answer is that they don't all have to be. It is just that unmanaged reserves provide things that managed reserves don't, such as a greater proportion of older forests with distinct ecological values, aquatic resources of exceptional quality, and the experience of backcountry recreation and solitude. This is a unique role for federal wilderness areas to play ... these values are provided across large areas virtually nowhere else. And by the way, don't let anyone tell you that old forests in New England don't provide ecological benefits, because the scientific literature has clearly established that they do.

Sustainably managed forests should and will continue to comprise the majority of Vermont's working landscape. But expanded wilderness areas will complement an active forest stewardship program on the Green Mountain National Forest and elsewhere, not impede it. Wilderness will provide one of the many building blocks we need to sustain ecosystems and all forms of outdoor recreation for future generations to enjoy

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William S. Keeton, Ph.D, is assistant professor of forestry, Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources, University of Vermont.