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Description of the Nature and Purpose of Friends of Blackwater's Allegheny Highlands Climate Change Impacts Initiative

Friends of Blackwater is a West Virginia-based conservation group that works in the Mid-Atlantic Allegheny Highlands region of the Appalachian mountains. See www.saveblackwater.org.

The Highlands region straddles the Appalachians' highest peaks -- including parts of Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, and Virginia. Hundreds of thousands of people live and work in the Highlands, and each year thousands of visitors come to enjoy the distinctive high-mountain climate. But unless the pace of global warming and climate change is slowed, the future of the ecology and economy that have enriched so many generations of residents and visitors is on the chopping block.

Friends of Blackwater is leading an Allegheny Highlands Climate Change Impacts Initiative highlighting the growing, dangerous impacts and risks from global warming and climate change to the Highlands' economy and ecology.

Today, scientific research is confirming the observations of farmers, gardeners, birdwatchers, and hunters -- climate change caused by global warming is already having significant impacts on the weather, plants, animals, water, and infrastructure of the Highlands.

Plants, trees, and animals are losing habitat from rising temperatures and changing precipitation -- threatening signature species like brook trout and red spruce with regional extinction. The frequency and risk of severe weather events and property damage from destructive flooding is growing.



Climate-sensitive creatures like the West Virginia Northern Flying Squirrel are threatened with extinction. Climate change increases the risk of extreme weather events, destroying property and burdening local governments and economies.

The mission of the Allegheny Highlands Climate Change Impacts Initiative is to promote wider public awareness and discussion of the impacts and risks of climate change for the Highlands; and to support local, regional, and national climate-smart solutions that will address those impacts and risks.

Since the Fall of 2013, the Initiative has engaged in research, planning, and networking to develop and implement a strategic effort to advance this mission. As part of this effort, the Initiative has had dozens of conversations with citizens around the region – and especially with persons in the scientific, professional, and educational community.

Groups consulted include the West Virginia NASA science educators group, the West Virginia University College of Law Center on Energy and Sustainability, the Union of Concerned Scientists Climate Impacts Collaborative, the Potomac Conservancy, the Appalachian Stewardship Foundation, and the West Virginia Master Naturalists Association. Several dozen scientists from Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, West Virginia, and Virginia contributed their expertise, as well as members of various regional environmental advocacy organizations.

These conversations led to the Initiative organizing a successful June 6-7, 2014 public conference at Blackwater Falls State Park, titled "Climate Change and the Highlands: What's at Risk – What's at Stake?" – featuring presentations by 18 climatologists, natural scientists, and policy experts. The 168 conference registrants included climate-concerned citizens, property owners, business people, educators, and other scientists. Details on the June Conference -- including media coverage, a speaker list, and a bibliography - can be found at the website www.alleghenyclimate.org.

The Initiative is currently (July 2014) preparing a "What's at Risk – What's at Stake?" report summarizing the presentations at the conference, and a companion powerpoint presentation, and a website and discussion guide. From Fall 2014 through June 2015, the Initiative will take the report "on the road" in a series of outreach/educational presentations to regional science classes, county, local, and state agencies and officials, foresters, business roundtables, editorial boards, etc.

The "road show" venues will include college and university campuses, churches, libraries, civic centers, and radio and television programs. In these programs, Initiative staff and volunteer scientists and educators in the Initiative network will discuss the current state of scientific understanding about climate change impacts and risks – globally, regionally, and particularly in the Highlands. A website with recordings of scientific presentations, studies, and active e-newsletter, Facebook and Twitter campaigns will publicize, complement and support the regional programs.

The Initiative will avoid debating divisive policy issues, and will focus instead on giving participants (1) the scientific information they need for further study, planning, and decision-making; and (2) a non-polarizing opportunity to learn about and discuss climate change.

The Initiative's outreach/educational efforts will grow a network of regional constituents who understand the impacts and dangers of climate change; and will empower and motivate that constituency to "push back" against climate change denial in civic discourse and to advocate for clean-energy/climate-smart solutions. The Initiative will also recruit potential presenters and attendees for a tentative October 16-18 2015 follow-up conference -- featuring a second round of expert presentations and discussions about climate change impacts, risks, mitigation, and adaptation.

Because climate change is not an issue that is going away, and because the impacts of climate change are an ever-growing presence in the Highlands, the Initiative is designed to be an ongoing effort that creates better and better independent and informed public conversations about the impacts of climate change, and about how to make climate-smart choices that reduce risks and avert the most dangerous consequences.

For more information, go to www.alleghenyclimate.org.