



Protecting Wilderness in the Midwest

Proposal Questions

Mission/History Of Organization

Indiana Forest Alliance (IFA) is Indiana's state-wide organization dedicated to the conservation of Indiana's native forest ecosystem. Founded in 1998, our mission is to preserve and restore Indiana's native forests for the enjoyment of all. We do this by educating, advocating, and organizing to build public support throughout Indiana for restoring viable remnants of that forest

JEDI Efforts and Impact

IFA is addressing environmental equity in our Forests For Indy (FFI) program. We mapped forests throughout Indianapolis and revealed that underserved communities have the least tree canopy. In 2024, we advocated successfully against zoning that would remove much of a sixty-acre forest before the Metropolitan Development Commission in Indianapolis, preserving an African

ecosystem. Prior to European settlement, Indiana was almost entirely old growth hardwood forests located in the heart of what was once the largest temperate, deciduous forest on the Earth. Although nearly all of it was wiped out in the nineteenth century, one fourth of Indiana's forest has grown back, much of it on public lands such as the Hoosier National Forest, where IFA works to restore wild nature at the landscape scale for ecological and recreational benefits. IFA envisions a reforested Indiana where everyone can enjoy a natural sanctuary in the complex modern world.

American community's only greenspace, a growing imperative in the age of climate change.

In addition to teaching about forests in an inner city summer camp, in April, 2024, IFA engaged Herron Group, a polling firm to conduct focus groups in three minority neighborhoods in Indianapolis to understand their relationships with urban forests and enlist their participation in decisions affecting those forests and their quality of life. From this work, we are cultivating inner city residents to become IFA's leaders and recruited one, an African American trustee from Pike Township, to IFA's Board of Directors in 2024.

Final Success

The Benjamin Harrison National Recreation Area and Wilderness Establishment Act (S.4402 and H.R.8535 in the 118th Congress) will be passed and signed by the President, adding approximately 15,300 acres to the Charles Deam Wilderness (more than doubling the size of Indiana's only wilderness to 28,253 acres) and establishing the 29,382 acre Benjamin Harrison National Recreation Area surrounding the expanded wilderness area.

Location Details

By expanding the Deam Wilderness to the east, congressional legislation will protect the oldest and deepest hardwood forest within the Hoosier National Forest (HNF). Conservationists have been trying to save this wild forest east of Monroe Reservoir for fifty years since it was proposed as one of the first Eastern Wilderness Areas in 1973, by HNF Supervisor, Claude Ferguson.

The area spans nearly 500 feet of elevational relief, rare in Indiana, rising from bottomlands between 525 to 550 feet to the famed Nebo Ridge stretching eastward from 928 foot Browning Hill in the proposed expanded Wilderness across fifteen miles of native hardwood forest into the valley of Little Salt Creek and up to the Bald Knob at 1030 feet in the National Recreational Area. To the north and south lie long ridges, steep hillsides, tranquil hollows and many miles of sparkling clear streams. Other names like Deckard Ridge, Panther Creek, Will Hay Branch, Fleetwood Branch, Bad Hollow, Hunter Creek, and Mose Ray Branch reflect the wildlife, history and people of the area.

Portions of Browning Hill Special Area are identified by the Forest Service as old growth forest. Chestnut oaks, American beeches, black gums and other trees exceed 300 years of age in some stands and much of the rest of the forest is within thirty years of returning to the old growth condition.

Three horse camps in the southeastern portion of the proposed Benjamin Harrison National Recreation Area are connected by a network of trails that make this area the most popular horseback riding area in the HNF. According to National Visitor Use Monitoring data, the Charles Deam Wilderness is one of the most heavily visited wilderness areas in Region 9 of the national forest system. Use of its Sycamore Creek, Grubb Ridge, Axsom

Branch and Cope Hollow Trails overflows on most weekends from spring to fall. Outside of the Deam, hikers, backpackers and mountain bikers use the Nebo Ridge Brown County D, Combs Creek, Hickory Ridge and Knobstone Trails in the proposed expanded Wilderness. Hikers, hunters and mushroom foragers reach Bad Hollow, Panther Creek, Porter Hollow and Eel Creek and many other hollows on deer paths. Quite simply, there is no other area in Indiana, where the public can enjoy wild nature on the landscape scale that exists in the Charles Deam Wilderness and the unbroken forests that extend to the east and south of it in the HNF.

Biodiversity in Project Area

The proposed expanded Deam wilderness and Benjamin Harrison National Recreation Area has rich biodiversity containing nearly twice the number of native tree species as exist in the entire state of Washington and assemblages of fungi, lichens and macroinvertebrates unique to each tree species. Bat studies in 2020, 2023 and 2024 have found the area's deep forest harbors reproducing populations of five federal listed or proposed endangered bat species including the Indiana bat, northern long-eared bat, and tricolored bat and the little brown bat under species status assessment for such listing. The sole viable reproducing population of the state endangered timber rattlesnake survives in the area with scientists finding as many as 10 of these snakes in single afternoon forays on Nebo Ridge. The cerulean warbler, a state endangered bird that is an indicator species for undisturbed hardwood forests, flies from points in South America farther than any other neotropical migrant songbird to nest in the area. The cerulean's numbers have declined by 70 percent across the eastern US since the 1960s. Ornithologists have documented as many as 22 nesting territories per square mile of this bird in the forest canopy above the Fleetwood Branch, making it one of the healthiest cerulean populations remaining in Indiana.

Regardless of regulatory roll backs, enabling 28,253 acres of mature hardwood forest within an expanded Deam Wilderness to return to the old growth condition and much of the near 30,000 acres within the proposed NRA to do the same will oblige the objectives of President Biden's Executive Order 14072 to combat climate change by using the nation's federal forests as carbon sinks. Protecting mature forest in the expanded Deam is key to the climate fight because half of the world's forest carbon is stored in the largest 1 percent

Expected Economic & Recreational Impact

Connecting these two areas will also bridge and expand a network of recreational trails within protected public forest, creating unparalleled opportunities for dispersed recreation in America's industrial heartland where there is high unmet demand for outdoor recreation opportunities in nature.

For example, the 160 mile Knobstone Trail, Indiana's longest backpacking trail, has just been completed enabling access to this island of nature by foot path extending from the outskirts of Indianapolis to the north to the suburbs of Louisville, Kentucky to the south. Within the area, spur trails can connect the Knobstone west to the Sycamore Creek, Terrill Ridge and Cope Hollow Trails in the existing Deam Wilderness and east to the Fork Ridge Trail in the NRA. Horse Trails from Saddle Ridge Horse Camp can be connected to the network of horse trails 15 miles away in three horse camps in the Hickory Ridge Area within the NRA. Mountain bike trails can be expanded from Brown County State Park 10 miles south into new areas in the southern portions of the NRA. Canoers and kayakers can take overnight trips on the Middle and South Forks of Salt Creek into Monroe Reservoir surrounded by protected natural habitat.

The expanded wilderness and NRA will provide opportunities for primitive recreation unmatched in the lower Midwest while allowing for that recreation to be spread out over a protected forest four times larger than currently exists, reducing damage from overuse of the existing Deam Wilderness. Providing these recreational experiences will generate economic benefits from increased visits to hotels, motels, bed & breakfasts, restaurants, campgrounds, outfitters and other outdoor recreation businesses in communities surrounding the expanded Deam Wilderness and NRA. In addition, minimizing sediment

of trees. Furthermore, this mixed, mesophytic hardwood forest does not burn easily making its protection an ideal long-term solution to the climate crisis.

The forest to be set aside in this legislation lies between the existing Deam Wilderness and the 15,850 acres of Brown County State Park. Connecting these two areas will set aside more than 73,400 acres or 115 contiguous square miles of protected public forest, the largest expanse of wild nature set aside for carbon sequestration, restoration of old growth forest, and preservation of biodiversity in Indiana, Ohio or Illinois.

Strategy & Timeline For Final Success

The goal is to save a unique expanse of forest for enjoyment of nature in the Midwest. To meet this goal, our objective is to pass legislation expanding the total protected acreage from 12,953 acres in the current Charles Deam Wilderness to 57,652 acres in the expanded Deam Wilderness and NRA. We developed a strong base of support for this legislation in 2024 and will build on that support in 2025 with the following activities:

1. Producing an Economic Study: Forests provide ecosystem services that produce financial benefits. IFA will employ Earth Economics, a professional firm of ecological economists to place a dollar value on the benefits that nature will provide from expanding the Deam Wilderness and creating the NRA (<https://www.eartheconomics.org/about-us>). Doing so will provide multiple benefits in addition to increasing dispersed recreation and protecting a major sole source water supply. These include carbon storage, stormwater retention, the protection of biodiversity and wildlife habitat and other benefits. There will be two phases to the study. Phase 1 will document ecosystem service values provided by the current Charles Deam Wilderness and management of surrounding national forest land versus those services provided by the expanded Deam Wilderness and NRA. IFA will provide shape files of maps delineating the currently protected and expanded protected area in the legislation to complete this comparison of values. Earth Economics will quantify the benefits and co-benefits from source water protection management to Monroe Reservoir that will occur because of the legislation. This phase will produce information in 2 to 3 months that will aid passage of the legislation in 2025.

Phase 2 will determine current and projected economic contributions of increased recreational visits from expansion of the wilderness and creation of the NRA. Earth Economics will use visitor

runoff from every acre of national forest within the Monroe Reservoir watershed will protect a drinking water supply paramount to the economy of the surrounding region.

Key Decision Makers

Governor Mike Braun: Mike is a conservationist with a deep love for Indiana's woods. IFA has a close working relationship with him and regularly discusses the legislation directly with Mike and his staff.

Senator Jim Banks: Governor Braun approached Jim Banks to reintroduce S.4402. Senator Banks does not serve on Senate Committees with jurisdiction over public lands bills. However, Banks served with Governor Braun as a fellow state legislator and has a warm working relationship with him. IFA discussed H.R.8535 with Banks' staff when he was Indiana's 3rd District Representative, touched base with his staff since his election to the Senate and is preparing further information about the legislation for them.

Representative Erin Houchin: The location of the wilderness in Houchin's 9th District, makes it vital that she reintroduce H.R. 8535 in the 119th Congress. She committed to reintroducing the legislation to IFA in January. Still, IFA expects to have to prod her to do so, given her involvement in the budget reconciliation process will likely extend into May. IFA is in regular contact with Houchin's Legislative Director. Like Banks, Governor Braun will be decisive in persuading her to reintroduce the legislation.

IFA has met with the Legislative Assistant for Agriculture to Representative Mark Messmer of Indiana's 8th District, a member of the House Agriculture Committee. We will reach out to staffs of Senator Boozman and Representative Thompson, Chairs of the Senate and House Agriculture Committees respectively after Governor Braun and/or his staff have talked to these Chairs. Governor Braun has also had a positive meeting with USDA Secretary Brooke Rollins. With pro-business leanings, financial benefits to businesses and support from the business community could heavily

data collected by IFA from federal monitoring programs and surveys to estimate current visitation and work with IFA to develop defensible estimates of future visitation. National forest IMPLAN modeling will be used to calculate the economic value of this increase visitation on the local community including the ripple effect of spending and the resulting benefit to the state's economy. We are asking TCA for \$35,000 to complete Phase 1 for use in 2025 and seeking \$60,000 from other sources to complete the recreation contribution analysis and full report in 2026.

2. Reintroducing the legislation and working with the Farm Bill: The primary author of the Benjamin Harrison National Recreation Area and Wilderness Establishment Act in the 118th Congress (S. 4202 and H.R. 8535), Senator Mike Braun who is now Indiana's new Governor, committed to IFA in December, 2024, to continue pushing for its passage in 2025 when congressional movement of the long-stalled Farm Bill will also provide a path for its passage. Governor Braun has begun discussions with Indiana's new Senator Jim Banks, a friend and ally, to reintroduce S. 4402 in the Senate. IFA is educating Bank's staff about the legislation. Representative Houchin of IN's 9th District which includes the proposed wilderness expansion/NRA area, committed to IFA in January to reintroduce H.R.8535 but will likely require continual prodding by IFA, given Houchin's involvement in the budget reconciliation process. Senator John Boozman, chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee was not opposed to efforts to add S.4402 to the Farm Bill in 2024. Furthermore, Braun's close ally in the Indiana Legislature, Mark Messmer, now serves on the House Agriculture Committee. IFA is reaching out to these Congressional members' staffs and Governor Braun is talking directly to them. Our ask to Banks and Houchin is to introduce the IN Wilderness/NRA legislation with jurisdiction assigned to the Agriculture Committees. From there, we will work to add the Indiana wilderness/NRA legislation to the Farm Bill during its markup and pass the legislation as part of the 2025 Farm Bill.

3. Building on 2024's Groundswell of Public Support: It is crucially important to keep building the support to expand the Deam Wilderness and establish the Benjamin Harrison National Recreation Area. In 2025, IFA will update all stakeholders in our coalition on the status of the legislation and our efforts. We are expanding support for the legislation from local governments, chambers and businesses in Jackson

influence these decision makers and underly one of the motives for undertaking the study of the economic benefits generated by this legislation.



and Lawrence Counties that make up Rep. Houchin's more conservative base. We are also generating support for the legislation from multiple regions and groups in the state aimed at Senator Banks. Through these activities, we are keeping the support for the legislation alive and growing. Constructing the compelling economic case for the legislation will strengthen that support and set the stage for its passage if not this year, then eventually as new leadership emerges from election cycles.

Elevate Voices

The first individuals IFA mobilized to support expansion of the Deam Wilderness were local residents who live in the nearby towns of Story, Elkinsville, Norman and Houston. We have continually consulted these residents about the legislation's provisions.

The proposed Wilderness Addition and NRA are less than 2 miles west of Freetown, home to many artifacts and a history of free African Americans (never enslaved). IFA has also been leading hikes to Paddy's Garden, an historic African American settlement in a nearby County in the HNF to see artifacts and discuss the history of this settlement. The first Black U.S. Senator, William Revels, spent time there with his brother, a key community figure. We are partnering with the Indiana Historical Society and Indiana University on this effort.

IFA has also reached out to the Lenape and Shawnee who were connected historically with the forests of southern Indiana that encompass the area. We are in the early stages of this and realize the great importance of elevating their voices. Initial conversations have been positive. With TCA's support, we will amplify African American and Native American voices and highlight the historical significance of this area which is often overlooked or unknown. Protecting wild nature that is accessible to populations in inner cities is tremendously important for equity in the region.

Passing this legislation will protect the largest wild forest in the lower Midwest and one of the only protected forests of significant size. This area is significant for marginalized and underrepresented groups given its location within a 1-hour drive of Indianapolis and 1.5 to 2 hours of other major cities such as Louisville and Cincinnati. Unlike many other American urban areas, minority residents in these cities and communities with lower incomes simply have no other wild expanse of this size to enjoy within a half day's drive and lack the incomes to afford trips to more distant locations.

Measurable On-Ground Outcomes

1. Widespread public awareness of the value of and support for expansion of the Deam Wilderness and creation of the Benjamin Harrison National Recreation Area and stakeholders committed to making this vision a reality.
2. 15,300 acres added to the Deam Wilderness.
3. A 29,382-acre National Recreation Area surrounding the expanded Deam Wilderness.
4. A federal law enacted that requires HNF management activities to protect the Monroe Reservoir water supply.
5. A federal law enacted that enables establishment of long-distance hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, and mountain biking trails through a wild expanse unsurpassed in Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois.



TCA Funding Plan Funding from TCA will be crucial to helping IFA sustain the momentum necessary to enact this legislation whether it occurs this year or in 2026. The \$50,000 requested will provide \$15,000 for staff time and expenses to continue outreach efforts that maintain and expand support for the legislation at the local, regional, and statewide levels. It will also provide \$35,000 for the first phase of an economic study demonstrating significant financial benefits from expanding the Deam Wilderness and establishing the Benjamin Harrison National Recreation Area that will make the case for the legislation even more compelling and help draw matching support from other funders to complete the second phase of the study. The full two-phased study can become a model for demonstrating the economic value of protecting public lands for wilderness and recreation.

Confidential Items There is nothing in our proposal that needs to be kept confidential.

How long it took to complete application

Other Relevant Application Details

We sincerely appreciate the opportunity you've given us and for your support in 2024!

