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## Conservation group target's state's Potomac headwaters region for protection as habitat for climate change transition

by **Rick Steelhammer**  
Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va.-- A million-acre section of the Potomac River's headwaters region along the West Virginia-Virginia border is being targeted for protection through a \$6 million initiative funded through a private conservation initiative.

The land is considered one of the four top climate change-resilient landscapes to be found in a 13-state segment of the eastern United States, according to an analysis of data from a Nature Conservancy study by the Open Space Institute.

Each of the four areas, chosen from among dozens evaluated by the Open Space Institute, is eligible to receive at least \$500,000 from the OSI, plus an additional share of \$5.5 million in grants for land conservation.

"These are places with landforms that support a wide range of biodiversity due to the complexity of the landscape," said Peter Howell, OSI's executive vice president. "They are also fairly unfragmented and undeveloped."

West Virginia land being targeted for protection through the OSI initiative includes portions of the Cacapon/Lost River watersheds in the Eastern Panhandle and the South Branch of the Potomac watershed, including Smoke Hole Canyon.

Elevations in the region range from 500 to about 3,800 feet. About 20 percent of the land is already protected by being part of either the Monongahela or George Washington National Forest, or being included in a West Virginia state park or wildlife management area.

By preserving landscapes with wide elevation ranges, diverse geology and a range of plant communities and soil types, plant and animal species in a changing climate will be able to take advantage of the microclimates found along their slopes, cliffs, valleys and canyons.

"If the area is not fragmented and not very developed, species can move through the landscape without hitting things like highways and towns," Howell said. "There's a treasure trove of diversity in the Cacapon and South Branch watersheds, and because not a lot of people know about it, it hasn't gone through a lot of change. It's an area like none other in the East."

Howell said he expects much of the grant money to be awarded by OSI to be used to help land trusts negotiate conservation easements with landowners, or to transfer land from willing sellers at sites within national forest proclamation boundaries to the U.S. Forest Service.

"We've put out a request for proposals to conservation groups working in the area," he said. "All kinds of public and private groups are welcome to apply."

West Virginia's Potomac headwaters area, Howell said, "will play a key role in the biggest issue of our time" by providing a place for "wildlife and plants to adapt to a warmer climate."

Additional grant money will be available from the OSI for mapping, research, outreach and planning within the region.

Other areas in the eastern United States targeted for protection and planning assistance by the OSI are the forests of southern New Hampshire and Main, the Middle Connecticut River region of Massachusetts and Vermont, and the

highlands of Kittatinny Ridge in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

The OSI initiative has a lead grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. Founded in 1974, the OSI has protected more than 116,000 acres in New York, and has assisted in the protection of an additional 2.2 million acres from Quebec to Georgia.

For information, visit [www.osiny.org](http://www.osiny.org)">[www.osiny.org](http://www.osiny.org).

Reach Rick Steelhammer at [rsteelham...@wvgazette.com](mailto:rsteelham...@wvgazette.com) or 304-348-5169.