

About the Dolly Sods Wilderness Stewards Program

The Dolly Sods Wilderness and adjacent public lands have seen rapid and steady increases in visitation over the last several years, and this has been accelerated during the pandemic. More visitation inevitably leads to more impact, both to the natural lands and processes, and to the experience of wilderness. The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy (WVHC) was instrumental in the designation of Dolly Sods as wilderness, and we feel a special sense of stewardship for the area.

WVHC is partnering with the Monongahela National Forest (MNF) to sponsor volunteer activities that will assist MNF in managing and preserving Dolly Sods Wilderness and adjacent areas. Below are descriptions of each of the different aspects of the Dolly Sods Wilderness Stewards Program and how you can become involved as a volunteer.

Wilderness Trailhead Stewards

Volunteers will be stationed at popular trailheads during times of peak visitation, mainly on weekends, and engage in brief conversation with visitors about what makes Dolly Sods unique, the values of wilderness, and Leave No Trace (LNT) practices. A “script” outlining the key messages provides a basis for the conversation, but volunteers will typically use their own words and adjust to the needs of the visitor. The script is keyed for an engagement of 30 to 60 seconds, but visitors frequently ask questions about trail conditions, route and camping suggestions, and weather, which provides an opportunity to work in other messages. WVHC has prepared a trail map of Dolly Sods with wilderness and LNT messages on the back, which we frequently hand out to hikers.

No special skills or background are required for volunteers, though familiarity with Dolly Sods and hiking experience will be helpful. Before starting at trailheads, volunteers will be asked to complete two free, self-guided online courses, and the MNF will provide a several-hour, in-person training and practice session on effective messaging, key concepts and safety considerations. The online courses are:

[The Wilderness Act of 1964](#). Introduces the key concept of the Act and how they are applied to designated Wilderness areas. Ends with an optional test and an opportunity to obtain a certificate. Allow about 2-3 hours.

[Leave No Trace Online Awareness Course](#). Provides an understanding of recreation-related impacts, the LNT Seven Principles and how Leave No Trace skills and ethics can help protect outdoor places. Certificate provided on completion. Allow 1-2 hours.

Trailhead Register Maintenance

The MNF is adding voluntary hiker sign-in registers at trailheads. These will provide information on the number of visitors and usage patterns that can be used to guide future allocation of resources. Volunteers will periodically check the boxes and replenish supplies, replace register pages, and forward the completed forms to the MNF. No experience needed; just minor training. Living close to Dolly Sods in order to adopt a regular route or fill in for other volunteers would be advantageous.

Campsite Inventory Crew

The MNF plans to conduct yearly or twice-yearly surveys of backcountry campsites in Dolly Sods. Volunteers would hike assigned trails or sections of the wilderness, record the location and condition of campsites, take photos, and make other observations, using a standard form

provided by the MNF. Volunteers should have the ability to hike at least several miles in Dolly Sods, though overnight trips should not be necessary. This part of the project is still in planning and more detail will be provided when ready to be implemented.

Trail Maintenance and Rehabilitation Crew

Under the direction of MNF trail specialists, volunteers will assist with trail maintenance, rehabilitation or rerouting. Tools and training will be provided by MNF. The ability to hike to the location and engage in physical labor will be important for most jobs, but lighter roles may be available to support and supply the crew. This part of the project is still in planning and more detail, as well as job options will be provided when it is ready to be implemented.

Traffic Monitoring and Documentation

At this point it is not clear whether this aspect will be needed to supplement MNF actions. If needed, volunteers would monitor and report on traffic and parking conditions, and possibly document with counts and photos. Notation of roadside camping may also be included. No engagement with visitors is involved. More information will be provided if this is implemented.

How to get involved

Simply fill out the form [here](#). If you have any other questions, write to dollysodsstewards@gmail.com We will be in touch if more information is needed and with information about training, scheduling, etc.

You are not required to make any specific time commitment. Some people may live close to Dolly Sods and thus be able to participate more often or fill in on short notice, but even if you live far away or can only join in the project occasionally, your involvement is welcome. We will send announcements about specific projects or dates. We will schedule Wilderness Trailhead Stewards on most weekends and holidays and (once you have been through the training) you will be welcome to sign up whenever your schedule allows. Each weekend day will involve a 3-4 hour period at the trailhead, though you would be welcome to stay longer.

Couples and families are welcome to participate and work as partners. There is no minimum age limit, so youths may also participate, under the judgement and discretion of their parents.

All wilderness stewards will receive a WVHC T-shirt and cap as a token of our appreciation and to help identify them when participating in the projects. Volunteers will fill out a Volunteer Service Agreement with WVHC. Expect pictures to be taken of volunteers in service for public relations purposes by both WVHC and the MNF. Membership in WVHC is not required, but is strongly encouraged, as it is through the strength of our members that we can continue to work with various agencies to protect and preserve the wild lands of West Virginia.