

# LAUREL FORK

## Boundary Description

**Laurel Fork** in Highland County from the national forest property boundary below Route 642 downstream to the Virginia/West Virginia state line for a total distance of approximately 4.1 miles.

## Observations

On October 30, 2002, a site visit to the nominated segment of Laurel Fork in Highland County was conducted by David C. Whitehurst as required by DEQ Exceptional Waters guidance. The nominated segment of Laurel Fork is contained entirely within George Washington National Forest and its location is remote and publicly accessible only by hiking down from one of the surrounding mountains through rather rugged terrain. Fortunately, DEQ staff was graciously granted access through private property to the upstream end of the nominated segment. This eliminated a time consuming hike in potentially hazardous conditions due to the extreme fog and lack of visibility.



Fog on Middle Mountain



Road to Laurel Fork



The stream valley that Laurel Fork flows through tends to have very steep sides and the stream has a moderate meander. The gradient of the stream could be described as moderate and the substrate was mostly cobble and gravel. Both sides of the stream were heavily wooded for most of the observed portion of the segment with mixed hardwoods and the occasional stand of hemlocks. Many sections had a veritable barrier of dense rhododendron, which is frequently referred to as "laurel" hence the name "Laurel Fork".

Because of steady rain over the past two days, water levels appeared to be up considerably leaving the water somewhat cloudy and turbulent. These conditions rendered it nearly impossible to observe any fish. Laurel Fork is designated by the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries as Class ii wild natural trout waters and in the professional opinion of staff the stream appears to have appropriate habitat parameters to support trout. A cursory benthic survey was done and caddisfly (trichoptera) and stonefly (plecoptera) were observed. Notable wildlife observed in the area were deer and ruffed grouse.



Laurel Fork and the national forest surrounding it provide an excellent opportunity for remote backcountry hiking and camping. The area also provides outstanding scenery for the photographer as well as excellent opportunities for bird- and wildlife watching.

### Conclusions

After considering observations made during a visit to the site, staff has concluded that Laurel Fork satisfies all three of the eligibility criteria to be considered for designation as Exceptional Waters. The environmental setting, recreational opportunities, and aquatic communities in the nominated segment of Laurel Fork appear to be of exceptional quality.

