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**ROBERT KENNEDY, JR. HELPS FOREST COALITION LAUNCH CONSERVATION VISION PUBLICATION****Initiative Endorsed by President Carter**

**[Flat Rock]** An April 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> weekend summit (10 a.m. start) at the Highland Lake Inn near Asheville, N.C., will celebrate the Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition's (SAFC) publication and vision for protection of 2.8 million acres of existing public lands across the region. Talks by Robert Kennedy, Jr., Larry Hamilton, Jim Lyons, Martha Marks and other prominent conservationists, will help preview the Conservation Vision of the SAFC and its 17 conservation member groups for the public and the press. An Atlanta kickoff and press briefing had been scheduled earlier (April 9), but was rescheduled and will now be consolidated with the Highland Lake Inn weekend.

Over 170 organizations have endorsed *Return the Great Forest* nationwide, including notable individuals such as President Jimmy Carter and Mike Dombeck, the former Forest Service Chief who retired in 2001. *Return the Great Forest* encourages citizens, lawmakers and civic groups to participate in conserving these areas. It pointedly charges the Forest Service with better supporting endangered watersheds and other special areas within the forest system.

President Jimmy Carter states, **"I am very impressed by this bold vision of how to restore and preserve the Southern Appalachian Forest, and hope that it can be realized."** This echoes President Theodore Roosevelt's 1902 statement, "In the (Southern Appalachian mountains) occur that marvelous variety and richness of plant growth which have led our ablest business men and scientists to ask for its preservation by the Government for the advancement of science and for the instruction and pleasure of the people of our own and future generations."

As Matt Hooton, the Chairman of the Emerald Triangle Commission and an Alabama realtor and timber businessman states, **"My family has been in the timber business for 75 years, and in *Return the Great Forest* we have, at last, a comprehensive vision we can aspire to—a future that promises the highest value for these treasured forests."**

The summit will be followed by a three-month roadshow with events in Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia - the entire region that was once defined by a single, vibrant, and connected forest.

*Return the Great Forest* will be taken all the way to Washington D.C. where a mandate will be presented to the region's congressional delegations to preserve these important lands.

*Return the Great Forest: A Conservation Vision for the Southern Appalachian Region* comes only months after the Southern Forest Resource Assessment cited sprawl and logging as the biggest threats to the South's forest. Yet, *Return the Great Forest* reveals that the Southern Appalachians still retain many of their natural ecosystems in the form of small, fragmented public lands, and that most of these lands have inadequate protection from logging, road building and changing political administration.

*Return the Great Forest* uses the principles of conservation biology to develop a network of connected conservation areas, starting with these fragmented public lands. **"By expanding protection, acquiring new lands from willing sellers, and ensuring sound management practices, we can return an unbroken, single forest that can provide recreational**

**-more-opportunities, fresh air, clean water and the rich biological diversity characteristic of healthy ecosystems,”** affirms Amy Belanger, SAFC Executive Director.

Seven-years-in-the-making, *Return the Great Forest* proposes core conservation areas made up of special parts of the USFS lands including, municipal and high biodiversity watersheds, old growth forests and unprotected cultural areas. At its periphery are areas that could be acquired from willing sellers to add to the protected land base and the voluntary protection of private land through conservation easements. In between are numerous other public lands in need of permanent protection.

At the summit, high profile speakers plus Hugh Irwin, *Return the Great Forest*'s co-creator will be on hand to answer questions, as well as SAFC's Executive Director, Amy Belanger, and Outreach Director, Taylor Barnhill. Attendance is by invitation only, therefore the event location should not appear in event coverage before April 13<sup>th</sup>. The summit on April 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> has a limited amount of space available, so please register as soon as possible by visiting our web site at <http://www.safc.org/registration.html>. (Live feeds at noon are welcome. Press kits, interviews, compelling facts, pre-press CD copies and photos available through SAFC's Communications Director: [michelle@safc.org](mailto:michelle@safc.org).)