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OURVIEW

Editorials

Allegheny needs wilderness areas

A mere hour's drive from Erie's prized Lake Erie shores sits another natural treasure: the Allegheny National Forest. Even among northwestern Pennsylvania's numerous natural assets, this wooded wonderland stands out as an invaluable jewel. So a cloud hangs over the U.S. Forest Service as it wraps up a long-promised and predictably controversial wilderness plan for the Allegheny: The Forest Service needs to get this right.

The stakes are high. How will the public use the Allegheny's 500,000 acres? Vast woods, many streams and varied wildlife, as well as lucrative oil, gas and timber rights are involved.

Environmental and development interests have long feuded over the Allegheny. As their final arbiter, the Forest Service isn't out to make friends with either side. It won't make friends when its plan is finally published.

But the Forest Service has space to maneuver and many options as it tries to make nature and

OUR POINT

The Allegheny National Forest should increase its number of wilderness areas.

commerce coexist in the Allegheny. The Forest Service has a good record of making tough calls and making everyone angry. In this process, that represents success.

This is an especially tricky call, because the Allegheny is so unique. It's Pennsylvania's only national forest. This is why organizations such as the Friends

of the Allegheny Wilderness have been aggressively calling for designating more acres as wilderness. This would preserve them from motorized recreation and commercial development, while creating rare national sanctuaries to mix with the Allegheny's existing recreation and commercial options.

At issue are some important numbers. Under current management, no more than 2 percent of the forest's acreage is designated as wilderness. This compares quite unfavorably to the 11 percent in other eastern national forests, and even more unfavorably to the 18 percent in national forests as a whole.

We have consistently maintained the Allegheny could use more wilderness, because there is nothing in the Mid-Atlantic region remotely comparable to Pennsylvania's national forest. This is one reason why U.S. Rep. Phil English of Erie, R-3rd Dist., is asking the Forest Service to maximize the Allegheny's wilderness.

The Forest Service is looking at designating two areas — Chestnut and Tracy ridges — as wilderness. This would bring the Allegheny's total to 5 percent.

Christopher Tucker, communications director for U.S. Rep. John Peterson of Pleasantville, R-5th Dist., said at this point in the process, Peterson is comfortable letting the Forest Service draw on its expertise and on-the-ground experience in assembling a sustainable, workable multi-use plan for the Allegheny, which is located in Peterson's sprawling rural district.

Is that good enough? There is no right answer.

But with eight new areas comprising 54,000 acres available for wilderness designation, why not take that final step? Doing so would bring the Allegheny up to the eastern wilderness average, though well below the national average.

The Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness is pushing the Forest Service to adopt this plan. So is English, who has written a letter to Allegheny National Forest Supervisor Kathleen Moore advocating the position of the Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness. That strikes us as a solid, pragmatic compromise.