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OPINION

SLICE OF WILDERNESS

Wells, roads and trails cut into Allegheny National Forest

Allegheny National Forest in north-west Pennsylvania is perhaps the most exploited public forest in the country. On its 533,000 acres are more than 10,000 active gas and oil wells (more than all other national forests combined), 2,700 miles of roads and thousands of acres that are harvested, "thinned" and selectively cut every year. It has numerous recreational facilities, including 224 miles of snowmobile trails.

What Allegheny doesn't have a lot of is protected wilderness. Only 9,000 acres, less than 2 percent of its woods, have been set aside by Congress as areas, in the words of the 1963 Wilderness Act, "where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." That compares with 18 percent of national forests generally and 11

percent of national forests in the East.

Friends of Allegheny Wilderness have proposed a citizens' plan to add 54,460 acres on eight different tracts to the national wilderness preservation system.

Naturally, industries that don't want any land — no matter how rich in biological diversity and natural beauty — to be off limits to logging or drilling are opposed. Moreover, 93 percent of Allegheny Forest's subsurface mineral rights are privately owned. The National Forest Service can suggest but cannot stop the owners of those rights from drilling for oil and gas, including on land set aside as wilderness.

Recently there have been signs that as many as 27 wells were being planned in a small area of the 5,200-acre Chestnut Ridge section that has been nominated for

wilderness protection. Whether drilling there remains financially viable, given the recent decline in oil prices, is unclear. What is clear is that the threat to what little wilderness-quality forest remains in the Allegheny Forest and Pennsylvania is uncomfortably close.

The federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, supported by royalties from offshore oil and gas wells, would be a good place to find the money needed to buy the mineral rights under Chestnut Ridge if the Bush administration hadn't diverted the funds to other uses. In the absence of government funds, wilderness supporters are left to call upon land conservancies and wealthy individuals to step up to prevent one of the last slices of wilderness in the state from being destroyed.