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SUNDAY

ONE OF AMERICA'S GREAT NEWSPAPERS

LET IT SNOW

Up to 3 inches
of snow.

High 29, low 15
weather c-16

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**

Final

Jan. 21, 2007

\$1.50

\$1.75

IN OUTLYING AREAS

outdoors

BEN MOYER

Wild Allegheny Public comments diverse; most favor more wilderness

Wilderness is wanted.

That's a conclusion that can be gleaned, at least, from 8,285 official comments received by the U. S.

Forest Service in response to its favored draft Allegheny National Forest management plan unveiled last year. When the USFS adopts a final version of the plan, the document will guide management of the Allegheny National Forest for the next 15 years.

According to the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, headquartered in Warren, more than 6,800. More than 80 percent, of comments favored the designation of more wilderness areas within the forest. About 10 percent (875) of comments opposed additional wilderness designation.

Mary Hosmer, an ANF forester, put a finer point on the makeup of comments.

"We did receive 8,285 total comments," she said. "But we've identified 517 as unique and substantive. We identified more than 7,700 comments as form letters of different types. Some advocated more wilderness, some less. Some wanted more ATV trails, some less. Whatever someone wants more of here, somebody else wants less. There is competing interest for virtually every acre of this forest."

Congress authorized designation of suitable national forest lands as wilderness in the Wilderness Act of 1964. The designation prohibits logging, mining and motorized access, but permits low-impact uses such as hiking, boating, hunting and fishing. Wilderness designation is controversial on the Allegheny National Forest because logging is important to the local economy, where school districts and municipalities receive a portion of the revenue from federal timber sales.

A growing number of visitors, however, use remote areas of the forest for low-density recreation and bring tourist dollars with them.

USFS had prepared four alternative plans, labeled A, B, C and D but chose Plan C as its preferred option. Plan C proposed that USFS would designate two areas, known as Chestnut Ridge and Tracy Ridge, totaling 14,000 acres, as wilderness. Currently, less than two percent of the 500,000-acre Allegheny National Forest is protected by wilderness designation.

Nationwide, about 18 percent of national forest lands are designated wilderness. Only 11 percent of national forest acres in eastern states have the designation. If designated as proposed by USFS, the Chestnut Ridge and Tracy Ridge parcels would boost protected wilderness to nearly five percent of the Allegheny National Forest's total area.

According to Kirk Johnson, FAW executive director, most of the comments that Hosmer classified as form letters were specific enough to asked USFS to designate six additional areas FAW had identified as worthy of wilderness protection. In 2003, FAW published the "Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest," in which the group recommended protection of 54,000 acres on eight tracts, including Chestnut and Tracy ridges.

"The thousands of comments that poured into the forest service's office specifically in favor of the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal clearly illustrate just how important our remaining wild places are to people here in Pennsylvania, and throughout the country," Johnson said.

"With public opinion now abundantly clear, we hope the forest service will listen to the people and recommend protection for all of the ANFs' remaining wild places that all Americans enjoy equal ownership of."

But not everyone in the region shares Johnson's view that public comments should influence Allegheny National Forest management. Doug Carlson is executive director of the Forest County Planning Commission and a prominent opponent of additional wilderness designation.

"Proper forest management should not be done by popular vote, it should be done by professionals who know what they're doing," he said. "There are a lot of self-proclaimed experts out there. We have an agency here [USFS] that has a century of experience and expertise. Am I going to trust them or what an advocacy group has to say about it?"

"One of the issues I've challenged Mr. Johnson on is simply that the kind of forest we have is dominated by hardwoods, and hardwoods do not grow under their own canopy. They are shade intolerant when they are seedlings. If we have wilderness, our ability to go in and do active management is compromised. If we lock up more of that forest in wilderness, where is the next forest coming from?"

Johnson maintains that Carlson's argument misses the point.

"Designating wilderness is not a means of achieving a particular forest composition," he said. "The Wilderness Act does not state that one tree species is superior to another. But by designating wilderness we do acknowledge that allowing only natural processes to influence growth of a forested area over time is more desirable than artificially maintaining that particular area in a suspended state viewed as the 'correct' composition by human beings. Even if the Forest Service designated all of our recommended areas, timber harvest would still be permitted on 88 percent of the forest."

Human influence on forests, though, is nothing new according to Carlson.

Carlson's biggest fear, he said, was that wilderness would detract from the Allegheny National Forest's ability to support wildlife. "My main concern is from a conservation standpoint," he said.

"I believe that if we have a managed forest it's going to be more biologically diverse. There are some particular species that may benefit from wilderness, but there are a multitude of species that cannot survive in a mature forest."

The USFS acknowledges that a number of plant and animal species depend on mature forest habitats that now exist or would develop in wilderness areas. Among these are the northern flying squirrel, cerulean warbler, northern goshawk, timber rattlesnake and American ginseng.

Hosmer said USFS is currently analyzing and responding to each of the 517 "unique and substantive" comments before adopting a final management plan.