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Keep it real

Allegheny National deserves more wilderness

The U.S. Forest Service is about to put the finishing touches on its wilderness plan for Allegheny National Forest — 500,000 acres of woods, trails, streams, wildlife, oil, gas and timber in northwestern Pennsylvania.

The plan, which contains a section on wilderness protection that must be approved by Congress, will determine for at least 15 years how competing interests will coexist on such public, yet jealously guarded, land. For that reason, no one has ever mistaken the forest for the peaceable kingdom.

Still, there is plenty of room in Allegheny National for responsible commercial interests to operate alongside strong conservation. It begins by designating a healthy amount of the most pristine areas as wilderness.

Today less than 2 percent of the forest's acreage is protected by wilderness designation, compared to 11 percent in other eastern national for-

ests and 18 percent in national forests across the country. One option before the Forest Service would designate two areas, Chestnut Ridge and Tracy Ridge, as wilderness. Their 14,000 acres would boost the forest's total wilderness area to almost 5 percent.



Pennsylvania deserves better. There are actually eight new areas (54,000 acres) that deserve protection, as advocated by Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness and other moderate groups. That would bring the portion of wilderness a hair above the eastern forest norm, though leave Allegheny still way behind the national average.

Thousands of citizens have e-mailed the Forest Service on the need for more wilderness in Allegheny. U.S. Rep. Phil English, a Republican from Erie, also urged the federal government to maximize the wilderness zone.

We couldn't agree more. Not just for us, but for future Pennsylvanians.