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Forest folly

Arbitrary lines hurt Pennsylvania preservation

Sometimes, it doesn't take a bulldozer to make wilderness vanish. Bureaucrats can do it with the stroke of a pen, as in the case of Allegheny National Forest.

Ever since Congress passed the 1964 National Wilderness Preservation System Act, federal wilderness designation has preserved land from logging, construction and road-building while leaving it open to recreational uses like hunting, fishing, hiking, camping and horseback riding.

About 9,000 acres of wilderness areas exist in the ANF, and thousands more are eligible for wilderness evaluation during this round of forest management planning, now in its final stages and headed to Congress for approval in 2006.

Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness is pushing for more designated wilderness areas within the ANF and has created a list of roadless tracts for consideration based on a Forest Service inventory and a federal evaluation of roadless areas. But in 1997 the Forest Service Eastern Region ordered that a half-mile-wide buffer dividing roadless areas from roads, power lines and other unnatural features be deducted from their official acreage — and that if what remained was under 2,500 acres, the area would not be up for wilderness evaluation.

The effect of this space-shaving is dramatic. One area, the Allegheny Front, dropped from 7,000 acres to 1,500; the

Clarion River Tract shrank from 6,000 to 958, and the Cornplanter Tract was lopped from 3,000 acres to 197, due to the added loss of a half-mile on either side of an overgrown and unusable abandoned road that cuts through it.

Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness has been lobbying the Forest Service to rescind the 1997 directive, so far unsuccessfully. In the meantime, of roadless areas that had been eligible for wilderness evaluation, the three named have been ruled out by the Forest Service, three others are still eligible and three new ones have been proposed by the Friends. The conservation group will also lobby Congress, which isn't required to accept Forest Service recommendations, to consider the ineligible areas.

The Forest Service's 1997 regional criteria apply only to Eastern forests, such as Allegheny National and Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia; the Wilderness Act sets no minimum acreage for designation. Nationwide, many federally designated areas are under 2,500 acres, the arbitrary line drawn by the directive.

The United States boasts huge wilderness areas, but only two-tenths of 1 percent are in the heavily developed Northeast. The Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness are right to challenge arbitrary rules that leave valuable lands vulnerable. Our region needs to protect what little is left among the superhighways and sprawl.