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Allegheny National Forest

Let more grow wild

When travelers pass "U.S. Forest Service" signs along a roadway, they assume they're entering protected land.

Many don't realize that the federal land is managed by the Department of Agriculture, which implies harvest and yield. Trees are a crop, not just a source of solace and recreation.

That's why loggers, drillers, sportsmen, off-road riders and environmentalists often disagree over how to interpret the Forest Service's mission "to provide the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people in the long run."

These competing interests really clash once a decade, when individual forests revise their management plans. The plans designate uses for various areas, similar to township zoning laws.

Allegheny National Forest, in Pennsylvania's northwest corner, has been working on its plan for two years. Located at the junction of Elk, Forest, McKean and Warren Counties, Allegheny is known for its furniture-quality hardwoods, oil and gas resources, and nature tourism. The Forest Service is deciding among four alternatives to accommodate all of those

uses, but none incorporates enough wild space — land that's just left alone. Only "Alternative D" comes close.

Currently, the Allegheny has just 9,000 acres of wilderness, or less than 2 percent of the forest's 513,000 acres. That's a far smaller proportion than the Forest Service's 18 percent national average or even the 11 percent Eastern region average. The Allegheny needs a bigger slice before the final plan is adopted in February.

By law, wilderness doesn't have to

A scant 9,000 acres of Pa.'s only national forest is wilderness. Future generations deserve better.

be virgin land. Indeed, most of the Allegheny was farmed or logged by the 1920s. When the national forest was designated in 1923, residents jokingly called it the "brush patch." Some worried that the forest would never recover.

It did. Now, as the only national forest in Pennsylvania, the Allegheny needs stricter protections.

Developers' bulldozers are

threatening much of the Northeastern forest canopy. Nationally, the United States lost 10 million acres to development from 1982 to 1997, with 26 million more acres expected to be cut down by 2030. The country should safeguard public land where it can.

Wilderness designation allows uses such as hunting, fishing, hiking and horseback riding, but guards land from damaging logging, oil and gas drilling, and off-road recreation. It's the best way to purify water, preserve wildlife habitat, and buffer the few remaining old-growth tree stands.

The advocacy group Friends of Allegheny Wilderness seeks 54,000 more wild acres, which would bring percentages in line with national averages. There would still be plenty of acreage to harvest valuable black cherry and sites to drill for oil and natural gas.

The Forest Service sets aside wilderness areas as a first step to permanent designation. Ultimately, Congress makes the final decision.

Wilderness protection embodies the very hope of democracy by valuing the rights of future generations on par with those of the present forest users. More of the Allegheny is worth saving.