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Embrace all needs in new forest plan

Early in 2006, U.S. Forest Service officials will release their Draft Environmental Impact Statement outlining alternatives for the future of Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest as they revise their 1986 long-term management plan.

During this revision process, the Forest Service is required to consider which additional tracts of the Allegheny should be protected as part of America's National Wilderness Preservation System — lands to be left in their natural condition in perpetuity by law.

Noted conservationist Aldo Leopold — a founder of The Wilderness Society — wrote in 1925 that the reason for the establishment of America's national forests was "... timber production and watershed protection, and these are and must always remain the primary purposes." In the same essay he also argued strongly for incorporating wilderness preservation into the overall stewardship of national forests.

That integrated approach still rings true today. Since Leopold's time, Congress has established standards for the management of our national forests through a series of important laws, including the 1960 Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act, the 1964 Wilderness Act and the 1975 Eastern Wilderness Areas Act, among others, all of which codified and underscored the importance of protecting wilderness in our nation's forests from coast to coast.

Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (FAW) has identified eight potential wilderness additions totaling 54,460 acres thoroughly documented in our formal Citizens' Wilderness Proposal (online at www.pawild.org). Nationwide, on average 18 percent of Forest Service land is protected as wilderness. In the East, the figure is only 11 percent.

Today, less than two percent of the Allegheny National Forest is permanently protected in this way — just two units totaling 9,000 acres. If all eight of our proposed areas were approved, wilderness in the 513,000-acre Allegheny would in-

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crease to some 63,000 acres (12 percent) — typical for eastern national forests, and still six percent below the national average.

Our wilderness protection efforts should not be viewed as a referendum on the legitimacy of logging here. After all, timber production was part of the long-

term rationale for President Calvin Coolidge in establishing the Allegheny National Forest. But today there are "zero cut" proponents who seek to end all logging on all national forests, including the Allegheny. Zero cut dogma typically ignores that Congress has long mandated that national forest management include logging, in addition to wilderness preservation and many other important uses.

The Allegheny National Forest produces specialized hardwood timber that is in high demand all over the world. If we were to completely cut off supply here, the demand for that high quality timber wouldn't go away but would shift to other — in many cases less protected and less responsibly managed — lands. It is certainly not appropriate to exploit the Allegheny with excessive clear-cut logging, as was the norm here annually in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But neither would a zero cut policy be realistic or, ultimately, environmentally responsible. Stewardship of our forest must be far more nuanced, with significant wilderness additions such as those outlined in our proposal, coupled with ecologically sensitive logging methods on suitable lands.

At the other end of the spectrum from zero cut are those who not only resist additional Allegheny National Forest wilderness designations, but urge that existing wilderness areas be undesignated by Congress and opened up for logging. This insular attitude fails to recognize the fact that the Allegheny is a national forest owned by all Americans equally, and that most Americans, while certainly wood product users, also strongly support additional wilderness protection.

There must be a real recognition that the Allegheny, Pennsylvania's only na-

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tional forest, does not exist merely as a standing inventory of wood fiber, here solely for systematic use by industrial interests.

As Leopold wrote, the history of our national forest system "... has been a history of the appearance and growth of new uses, which, when skillfully adjusted to primary uses and to each other, were one by one provided for and the net public benefit correspondingly increased."

There is a clear need to protect additional wilderness in the Allegheny National Forest during this round of forest planning. To do so will help balance the present range of forest uses for future generations of people and wildlife alike.

Former Pennsylvania governor and first U.S. Forest Service Chief Gifford Pinchot held that national forests should be managed for the greatest good for the greatest number over the longest period of time. Following Pinchot's overarching intent, the ongoing Forest Plan revision should fully evaluate wilderness protection for all eight of Friends of Allegheny Wilderness's citizen-proposed wilderness areas.

Johnson, a Warren resident, is executive director of the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness.