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FAW solicits business backing for wilderness designations in ANF

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Regional businesses are weighing in on wilderness.

According to Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (FAW), more than 100 businesses in the state have expressed their support for more wilderness in the Allegheny National Forest.

"Wilderness designation is the highest level of protec-

tion that can be given federal public lands, leaving them in their natural condition by law in perpetuity," FAW Executive Director Kirk Johnson said.

Although the Allegheny National Forest Plan recently published by the U.S. Forestry Service does not call for more wilderness, Congress ultimately makes the decision to designate wilderness.

Several county businesses are among those in support of the FAW effort.

The potential tourism benefit of wilderness are on most of their minds.

"We have to rely on the wilderness to build some kind of economic stability," Legends Restaurant Owner Don Navaroli said. "With the decline of industry and jobs, the only resource we have left is our wilderness."

"We think it's vital to our economy," he said.

More wilderness "could be a shot in the arm," Allegheny Cellars Winery Owner Alan Chapel said.

"I think tourists would like to see trees and forest and wildlife, more than they would oil rigs and muddy roads," Chapel said. "The Allegheny National Forest is the land of many uses, it

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Backing for wilderness...

should be more than just timber and oil.”
But it's not all economic impact.

“Having been to true wilderness areas, there's nothing like it,” he said. “I'd like to see more of it.”

Another business owner, who asked that her name not be used, explained her backing of the FAW effort. “We've got to do something in this area,” she said. “We've got it all and we're ignoring it. Our wilderness could do wonders for this area, but they're not really going after it and they're not trying to save it.”

FAW is a non-profit organization that advocates multiple use of the forest.

Another local non-profit group, Allegheny Forest Alliance (AFA), advocates sustainable management of the forest and represents a “coalition of school districts, townships, recreation groups, businesses and others.” AFA does not support more wilderness designation.

On its Web site, www.renewableforests.com, AFA lists a number of reasons why.

- “Forest conditions on

the ANF do not meet the criteria for wilderness as described in the “Wilderness Act.”

- “Reducing forest management options does not support sustainability.”

- Wilderness does not promote multiple uses of the forest.”

- “The ANF by and large offers a “wilderness like experience” for most Americans without Congressional designation.”

- “Wilderness evolves and will unlikely retain its original characteristics.”

According to AFA, wilderness does not encourage tourism. “Fewer than one tenth of one percent of recreational visitor days are spent in wilderness areas on the ANF.”

“Thirty wildlife species use early successional habitat (seedling/sapling, 0-19 years) exclusively, while 10 wildlife species use mature forests (50-109 years old),” according to AFA. “84 percent of the ANF is mature while only 7 percent is early successional.”

The economic impact of the forest for AFA comes from the timber industry.

- “More than 800 jobs have

been directly related to the wood resources produced on the ANF over the past decade and a half with an estimated employment impact average of \$40 million annually.”

According to AFA, the average harvest on the forest represents about 7,000 acres.

About 9,000 acres, or 2 percent, of the 513,200-acre forest is currently designated as wilderness.

“Today, only two areas, — the 8,600-acre Hickory Creek Wilderness and the Allegheny Islands Wilderness composed of seven islands totaling 368 acres in the Allegheny River — are designated wilderness,” Johnson said.

The FAW proposal would increase that total to almost 55,000 — about 12 percent, “commensurate with other national forests in the eastern United States,” Johnson said.

FAW isn't asking to bump the ANF all the way

up to national averages. He said 18 percent of national forest land is designated wilderness.

“Permanently protecting the remaining qualifying areas here as wilderness would protect the best of the diverse values of the Allegheny National Forest, provide for the region's economic needs today and tomorrow, and leave a wild legacy for future generations,” Johnson said. “It would be a strong long-term investment and bring real balance to the overall stewardship of the commonwealth's sole national forest.”

The FAW proposal would set aside another 10 percent of the forest, leaving almost 90 percent for the other uses.

The support for the FAW is geographically widespread.

Of the 100 supporters listed on the FAW Web site (www.pawild.org), seven are in Warren County and

14 more are in the other three counties of the ANF.

Almost as many of the supporters are in Centre and Clinton counties, with 10 in State College, and three each in Bellefont and Lock Haven.

Mercer and Butler counties hold eight, and the remainder, including nine in the City of Erie and a total of six from Chautauqua and Cattaraugus counties in New York, generally come from the counties surrounding the four forest counties.