

Help stop Great Outdoors Giveaway

By **KIRK JOHNSON**
Guest Columnist

Pennsylvania is home to spectacular landscapes and outdoor recreation opportunities. People flock to places like Marsh Creek State Park, the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge, and the Allegheny National Forest. These are retreats from urban life that all Pennsylvanians can be proud to have so close.

The Allegheny in particular is home to some real crown jewels of the eastern U.S. - Hickory Creek and the Allegheny Islands wilderness areas provide opportunities to hike among towering second-growth hardwoods and paddle the national wild and scenic Allegheny River among the wilderness islands. However, many thousands of undeveloped acres of roadless land in the Allegheny do not yet have the permanent protection that these areas do.

For many years, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness has worked with local stakeholders to craft a plan that protects the last best remnants of wild Pennsylvania with input from locals, the people who know the land best. Substantial progress has been made, with most involved appreciating the necessity of achieving the strongest possible protection for the undeveloped watersheds vital to the water supply for our area.

But Congress is now considering the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act (H.R.1581/S.1087). Call it the Great Outdoors Giveaway, for it would summarily withdraw protection for roadless lands all across the country.

This giveaway bill is a legislative tantrum thrown by some in Congress against the very idea that still-wild places should be carefully conserved on a case-by-case basis with input from locals. Friends of Allegheny Wilderness and our many supporters across the state are hoping that our representatives take up the spirit of the late Pennsylvania Rep. John P. Saylor of Johnstown who was considered the father of the 1964 Wilderness Act in the Congress - and oppose the Great Outdoors Giveaway.

Under the Great Outdoors Giveaway bill, spectacular roadless areas in the Allegheny including Tracy Ridge, Allegheny Front, Cornplanter, and the Clarion River area would be made more vulnerable to the kind of development that many across Pennsylvania

find undesirable. These are areas former Pennsylvania Senators Hugh Scott and Richard Schweiker dearly sought to have designated as wilderness back in the 1970s.

Beyond the Allegheny, this legislation will "release" millions of acres all cross the country. These lands, popular with hunters, anglers, hikers, campers, birders and the like, provide a livelihood to local economies. The outdoor industry contributes \$730 billion annually to the U.S. economy and supports some 6.5 million jobs that depend on conservation of public lands, where their customers use the products they make and sell. In 2006 alone, more than four mil-

lion Pennsylvanians went hunting, fishing or wildlife-watching, which generated more than \$4 billion for the state's economy.

Leaders of this industry as well as hunting and fishing organizations, business owners, local elected officials and conservationists across the country have made it clear to Congress that the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act is not the way to go about managing the protection of these lands. We need to stop the Great Outdoors Giveaway.

Kirk Johnson is executive director of the Warren-based nonprofit Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (www.pawild.org)