

# Erie Times-News

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## OURVIEW

Editorials

### Allegheny needs more protection

**T**he Allegheny National Forest, which comprises more than 500,000 acres of woodland, is one of northwestern Pennsylvania's most important natural resources. However, only 9,000 of those acres are designated as "wilderness" and thus protected from harvesting. That's an unacceptably puny 2 percent. That figure should be at the very least 11 percent, the average in the eastern United States.

Some explanations are necessary.

Setting aside an area as a national forest does not mean no one ever touches it again. Trees can still be harvested as a cash crop, though under the supervision of the federal Department of Agriculture.

However, a wilderness designation forbids damaging logging, oil and gas drilling, and off-road recreation. It still allows hunting, fishing, hiking and horseback riding.

The U.S. Forest Service has been working on a plan for the Allegheny for two years. You can see this federal agency's problem. As a federal agency, it should listen to the voice of the people. Or rather, the voices. Loggers, drillers, off-road riders, hunters and environmentalists quarrel over the best plan.

Developers say they will respect the environment. Loggers say their work actually benefits forests. Environmentalists say the pristine forest comes first.

The advocacy group Friends of Allegheny Wilderness wants 54,000 more wild acres, which would bring the percentage up to the *national* average, 18 percent. As the group points out, thousands and thousands of acres remain open for development.

There is a case to be made for that 18 percent level. It's no secret that unmanaged development is already threatening much of the Northeast's 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.

It's also no secret that the federal government needs to do a more responsible job protecting public lands like the Allegheny National Forest.

We have always advocated the rational development of our natural resources. But it's time to protect more of the Allegheny National Forest. Protect more before it's too late.