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FRIDAY FORUM Today's topic: Public lands

Writers share their thoughts on significant issues

Wilderness acts mark birthdays

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My ancestors arrived in Warren County from Östergötland County, Sweden, in the late 1800s.

And like other immigrants, they were industrious people. My great-great-grandfather John Hofstedt made his living as a tannery laborer in Stoneham, as did his son Peter.

Tanning was a very important industry of the region at that time, relying upon the surrounding resources of Penn's Woods to prosper.

In 1923, the Allegheny National Forest was established on lands in Elk, Forest, McKean and Warren counties, where the great tanning industry once thrived, for the purposes of timber production and watershed protection.

Today, there are no longer any tanneries because the resource that drove that industry — old-growth hemlock trees — was hastily overexploited. But there is still an important wood-products industry that derives benefits from the multiple-use of the Allegheny. However, it is not just wood products that enrich the lives of citizens today.

Forty-five years ago, a bipartisan group of lawmakers agreed to legislation that would have a lasting impact on our nation's public lands — not by changing them, but by making sure some portion of these magnificent wild places would remain undeveloped in perpetuity.

The federal Wilderness Act, signed



Kirk Johnson

will always have the opportunity to experience some part of the original America.

Since then, ordinary citizens, working through their elected representatives, have employed the Wilderness Act to protect nearly 110 million acres within America's National Wilderness Preservation System. Thanks to support and leadership from both Republicans and Democrats, Congress has passed 140 bills preserving wild land in 44 states, including the wildly popular Hickory Creek and Allegheny Islands Wilderness areas in Pennsylvania.

In addition to being the 45th anniversary of the Wilderness Act this year, it is also the 25th anniversary of the Pennsylvania Wilderness Act — legislation that gave Pennsylvanians our only federal wilderness areas.

The Pennsylvania Wilderness Act was signed into law by President Reagan on Oct. 30, 1984. It was the product of 11 years of debate and compromise.

Then first-term U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter voted for the legislation, stating "this is not only a great day for Pennsylvania but for our entire nation." The late Sen. John Heinz

into law Sept. 3, 1964, was statutory acknowledgment that America's wild landscapes helped shape us as a people and that there is significant value in ensuring future generations

observed "this historic legislation ... is an effective balance among the competing commercial, environmental and recreational benefits to be derived from the area."

Though we gratefully celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Pennsylvania Wilderness Act, we must also acknowledge that less than 2 percent of the Allegheny is permanently protected.

Other national forests around the East have on average 11 percent of their lands designated as wilderness. Friends of Allegheny Wilderness has proposed designating as wilderness 54,460 acres of Allegheny National Forest. During the Forest Service's recently completed Forest Plan revision, more than 6,800 of a total of 8,200 public comments — greater than 80 percent — specifically advocated for FAW and the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal.

Some are uneasy about designating additional portions of the Allegheny as wilderness, believing it will lead over time to eliminating timbering from the entire forest.

Clearly, there are people who would love to see FAW and the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal used to achieve broader anti-logging goals. However, it was never the intention of the framers of the Wilderness Act to have their magnanimous legislation used in such a cynical way.

The Citizens' Wilderness Proposal precisely delineates that about 12 percent of the forest be protected as wilderness. FAW will work to ensure that our wilderness efforts are not misused by faraway ideologues — some

of whom have perhaps never even set foot in Pennsylvania, let alone the Allegheny.

This 25th year of the Pennsylvania Wilderness Act is an anniversary worth celebrating, for wilderness is much of what defines us as Americans. As we enjoy autumn, many of us will be hunting, hiking, fishing or paddling in some of the special wild places bequeathed to us by those who years ago had the foresight to preserve some of our most treasured landscapes.

Shouldn't we all work to ensure that all areas of the Allegheny deserving of such protection receive it?

As I sit here writing this in the serenity of a beautiful sunny day at the top of Oakland Cemetery, overlooking the verdant hills and valleys of Warren, where my great-great-grandfather Hofstedt was laid to rest, I have a sense of connectedness with my family's and the Allegheny region's intertwined histories.

Based on my experience of hundreds of visits to Hickory Creek, Allegheny Islands, and our proposed wilderness areas over the years, I feel confident that my ancestors who scraped a living out of these woods would approve of FAW's approach to permanently protect forest industry jobs, recreation and significant additional wilderness to benefit all future generations of people and wildlife alike in the land they loved and adopted as their own.

KIRK JOHNSON is executive director for the Warren-based nonprofit organization Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (www.pawild.org).