

Planners rule out forest roadless areas

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WARREN — Three roadless areas totaling nearly 14,000 acres disappeared in the Allegheny National Forest when it came time to consider areas for wilderness recommendations.

It was no magic trick, but rather the result of a U.S. Forest Service Eastern Region planning directive issued in 1997.

Roadless areas are eligible for wilderness evaluation during national forest management planning, which is now in the final stages for the Allegheny National Forest.

"We know the agency previously identified these as roadless areas, but now when it's time to do the forest plan, all of a sudden roadless areas are no longer roadless," said Kirk Johnson, director of the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness.

The organization advocates expansion of designated wilderness areas within the national forest.

It developed an extensive and detailed plan for additional areas to be evaluated by the Forest Service for wilderness consideration.

FAW's proposals were based in part on the roadless areas identified by the Forest Service in the 1970s through the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (R.A.R.E. II) and again in 2000 under a Clinton administration directive.

Both R.A.R.E. II and the 2000 evaluation identified the Allegheny Front at 7,424 acres, Clarion River Tract at 3,440 acres and the Cornplanter Tract at 3,012 acres as roadless.

However, the Forest Service excluded those areas for evaluation as possible wilderness areas to be recommended to Congress as it developed management alternatives for the Allegheny National Forest.

The Forest Service cited a 1997 directive from then-Northeast regional forester Robert Jacobs.

His directive required a half-mile buffer zone separating

roadless areas from improved roads, significant mineral activities, utility corridors, reservoirs and other impacts for planning purposes and wilderness evaluation.

Putting the buffer zone in place effectively reduced each of the three areas below 2,500 acres, the threshold for designation as roadless and therefore for wilderness evaluation.

FAW appealed to current regional forester Randy Moore to rescind the directive without success.

Johnson said there is nothing in the Wilderness Act or in the Forest Service's past practices requiring a half-mile buffer. In fact, the Allegheny Island Wilderness is an example of a designated wilderness that does not have the required buffer zone, he said.

Allegheny National Forest spokesman Steve Miller said the national forest planners had no choice but to follow the regional directive.

"We have to operate under the guidance and directions we are

given," he said. "I can sympathize with FAW and Kirk Johnson's frustrations, but I don't know what to tell them other than these are the rules of the game as we are given them."

The Forest Service's draft management alternatives for the Allegheny National Forest call for only Tracy Ridge, 9,188 acres, Chestnut Ridge, 5,063 acres and Minister Valley, 9,050 acres, to be evaluated for possible wilderness recommendation.

The Forest Service can only evaluate and recommend areas. Wilderness designation comes through congressional legislation.

Johnson said Congress is not bound by Forest Service recommendations, and FAW will lobby to have Congress consider all the areas in its proposal for wilderness designation, which total about 50,000 acres.

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