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FOREST'S FUTURE

Extending wilderness protection would aid Allegheny's treasure

Allegheny National Forest sprawls across 513,000 acres in northwest Pennsylvania, its future about to be decided as the U.S. Forest Service prepares to revise its 16-year-old management plan.

This is Pennsylvania's only national forest. And it is among the most intensively exploited in the entire system. Logging, oil and gas extraction have long taken place here and are part of the backbone of the region's economy.

Only 2% of Allegheny National Forest has been designated as wilderness area

But not all of this forest is in such use. While only 9,000 acres — less than 2 percent of the forest — are protected as wilderness, upward of 50,000 additional acres may qualify for such protection.

The Forest Service should give serious consideration to recommending that wilderness protection be accorded to what remains of Allegheny's significant blocks of wild areas.

Of course, the extractive industries don't want one additional acre put out of reach of a chain saw. The head of the timber industry in the area has gone so far as to suggest that what little wilderness protection exists in Allegheny should be revoked.

National Forests are intended for multiple uses, including logging, mineral extraction, recreation, watershed protection and wilderness preservation. Clearly, the one area in Allegheny that has been shortchanged is the latter.

Nationally, about 18 percent of National Forest acreage has been given wilderness protection. For National Forests in the East, about 10 percent of the forest land is protected wilderness.

The less than 2 percent in Allegheny just doesn't cut it.

This is a forest that lies within a day's drive of tens of millions of Americans, who increasingly are looking for places where they can experience nature, where they can see wild plants and animals in their undisturbed natural setting, and where they can gain some sense of what this great nation was like when the pioneers first pushed across the Alleghenies.

You can try, but in the end you can't put a dollar value on the worth and benefits of untrampled nature. The argument is made that expanded wilderness will attract more visitors, who will spend dollars in the local economy and create jobs. And that is doubtless true. But this can't be about money because no one can calculate the entirety of benefits that wilderness provides, especially as truly wild land becomes increasingly scarce.

There is nothing radical about the proposed expansion of protected areas in the Allegheny National Forest. Back in 1974, Pennsylvania's two senators, Hugh Scott and Richard Schweiker, actively and enthusiastically sought official wilderness designation for as much as 50,000 acres in Allegheny, but it was not to be.

That missed opportunity should not be repeated. Those 50,000 acres that still contain sufficient wild characteristics to qualify for wilderness designation under the more liberal rules that apply to National Forests in the East need to be protected this time around.

Given the present and past aggressive exploitation of the Allegheny National Forest, such an opportunity may never come to Pennsylvania again.