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A legacy too precious to destroy

Americans of every political stripe should cherish the beauty and benefits of our wilderness

There are many iconic places cherished by the people who call Pennsylvania home. For me it is the forests and wild areas that I was raised to respect and grew to love. As a child, I watched my uncle — former Republican Pennsylvania congressman John Saylor — work tirelessly to protect our natural heritage for future generations by pioneering passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964 and other important outdoor legislation. The citizens of Penn's Woods have always had a love affair with our state's beautiful mountains, fields and streams, their animals and fish.

For my family, being wise stewards of our wild and scenic lands and waterways was not a Democratic or Republican principle. It was fundamental to the American spirit and a nonpartisan legacy rooted in the leadership of President Theodore Roosevelt and other farsighted individuals in both political parties. My uncle devoted his service to ensure that the places Teddy and other great conservationists first protected would remain that way.

When my uncle was in Congress, reaching a sound consensus on public policy was easier. The Wilderness Act of 1964 passed just shy of unanimous consent. I personally worked to pass the Eastern Wilderness Act of 1975 — and was always delighted to find strong support in both political parties. Just two years ago, the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 passed with more than 70 votes in the Senate.

Thanks to my uncle and many other leaders who had the foresight to conserve our vanishing wilderness, we have a natural wilderness legacy that is the envy of many people around the world. Pennsylvania enjoys two National Wilderness areas — Allegheny Islands Wilderness and Hickory Creek Wilderness — but there are other places in Pennsylvania that are worthy of Wilderness designation.

Unfortunately in recent months, a bipartisan, widely supported national public policy favoring wilderness protection has become a gambling chip

among political partisans. Today, the sanctity of places we love are at risk due to deep spending cuts for critical programs and legislation that would abruptly and unwisely open up millions of wild lands to commercial polluters, including nearly 25,000 acres here in Pennsylvania.

Most of the 25,000 acres that would be lost are located along the banks of the Allegheny Reservoir and along the Allegheny Wild and Scenic River. These forest areas — Cornplanter, Tracy Ridge and the Allegheny Front — help provide clean water and clean air, plus provide innumerable recreation opportunities, including hunting and fishing.

The legislation threatening these lands, the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act, has been aptly described as a "Great Outdoors Give-

away" that will expose our air and drinking water to industrial-style pollution. The proposed legislation is dangerously out of balance, putting an incredible 88 percent of our National Forests and Bureau of Land Management lands in the hands of those who prefer commercial development and profits over human and environmental health.

The Great Outdoors Giveaway is based on a simple but frightening proposition: no more wilderness! If passed, this legislation would open roughly 60 million acres of wilderness-caliber lands to destructive, unchecked development. These are lands that thousands of people have been enjoying for wonderful wilderness experiences. This astonishing bill would prohibit the Forest Service and BLM from protecting our wildest places — areas such

as Cornplanter, Tracy Ridge and the Allegheny Front — and from preserving the ability of these lands to be designated as formal Wildernesses down the road. Once the wilderness character of these precious lands is despoiled, the damage will last for generations.

Sadly and, I believe, misguidedly one of Pennsylvania's own congressional representatives — Rep. Glenn Thompson — is a co-sponsor to this imprudent legislation. Mr. Thompson represents the most rural district in Pennsylvania. With all due respect to the congressman, what America's and Pennsylvania's predominantly rural communities really need is outdoor recreation-focused businesses near protected wilderness lands to provide sustainable and economically fulfilling jobs that will be there for generations to come. The outdoor recreation industry contributes \$730 billion annually to the U.S. economy and supports nearly 6.5 million jobs. Surely we should not contemplate the passage of radical legislation that will greatly lessen the outdoor appeal and job-sustaining nature of our wild forests, fields and streams.

Support for this bill is out of touch with the legacy built by public servants like President Roosevelt and my uncle who committed their lives to preserving America's natural legacy for future generations.

Some time ago a Pennsylvania newspaper named my uncle "one of the greatest conservationists ever to serve in Congress."

"John Saylor," said a leading conservationist of the time, "stood as tall as the Redwoods he spent so much of his life to protect." I'm proud of that heritage and humbled by his example.

It's time to turn back the "Great Outdoors Giveaway" and stand up for the wilderness that is the legacy of both parties, and that forever belongs to the American people.

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