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Allegheny Forest gets push for wilderness

12% of land would be free of development

By Don Hopey
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Stephen Robar, a political science professor at the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford, enjoys hiking and snowshoeing in the Allegheny National Forest and wants to see wilderness opportunities for those recreational pursuits preserved and expanded.

That's why Dr. Robar joined 53 other scientists and academics last week in endorsing a proposal to designate eight new wilderness areas totaling 54,640 acres on the national forest in Elk, Forest, McKean and Warren counties.

"This is a very reasonable effort to bring balanced wilder-

ness values to the Allegheny National Forest, where the inclusion of some additional wilderness uses is warranted," said Dr. Robar, who is also director of the environmental studies program at Pitt Bradford. "I'm in full support of the various, multiple uses of the forest, but sportsmen, recreationalists and backpackers could all benefit from more wilderness."

The six-page letter signed by Dr. Robar and a host of botanists, biologists, herpetologists, ecologists and economists supports the wilderness designation proposal of the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, a group

SEE **FOREST**, PAGE A-4

Group pushes for more wilderness in Allegheny Forest

FOREST, FROM PAGE A-1

formed eight years ago to advocate for more wilderness in the state's only national forest, about 12 miles northeast of Pittsburgh.

Wilderness designation, according to the letter, would help improve ecological diversity and health on the entire Allegheny Plateau, protect endangered species and preserve forest landscapes threatened by timbering, expanding oil and gas drilling and road building.

The 513,000-acre forest has just two wilderness areas totaling 8,979 acres, or less than 2 percent. On average, 18 percent of all national forest land in the U.S. is designated wilderness and protected from road building and development in the National Wilderness Preservation System. That system includes a total of 107 million acres, but very little — two tenths of 1 percent — is located in the Northeast.

The proposal by Friends of

Allegheny Wilderness would increase the amount of wilderness designated in the Allegheny to 63,619 acres, about 12 percent of the forest and in line with other national forests in the eastern part of the nation.

"This bold statement from the scientific community underscores the need to bring real balance to the multiple uses of the Allegheny National Forest," said Kirk Johnson, executive director of the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness. "We know that there will always be logging, motorized recreation and oil development here, but the continuing integrity of our remaining wild areas is very much in jeopardy and requires the swift action of the Congress to alleviate the threat."

The letter and a new 15-minute video produced by the group and highlighting the forest's proposed wilderness areas were sent to the state's congressional delegation and are part of a reinvigorated effort to gain congress-

sional support for wilderness expansion in the forest.

Pennsylvania's senators and U.S. Reps. Glenn Thompson, R-Centre, and Kathy Dahlkemper, D-Erie, two first-term members of Congress representing districts that include the forest, would have to support and introduce legislation to expand the forest's wilderness acreage.

Jordan Clark, chief of staff for Mr. Thompson, said the new congressman received the letter but hasn't had a chance to review the group's wilderness proposal. Ms. Dahlkemper was unavailable for comment.

"The Allegheny is unique. It's a multiple-use forest, with recreation, oil and gas drilling and timbering, so it's the economic engine for four or six counties," Mr. Clark said. "It's very complicated because anytime anyone proposes anything in the forest, it affects everything else. A proposal like this would have to be looked at very thoroughly."

Since the federal Wilderness

Act became law in 1964, only the 8,600-acre Hickory Creek Wilderness and seven islands in the Allegheny River totaling 368 acres were declared wilderness in 1984. Proposals to establish more wilderness areas in the Allegheny have been opposed by timbering, oil and gas industries that view wilderness designations as an unnecessary restriction on economic development.

The Allegheny Forest Alliance, a group representing the timber industry, school districts and municipalities near the forest, has said expansion of wilderness there isn't justified by use or economics.

"Wilderness on the Allegheny is a very polarizing idea," Mr. Johnson said. "Black cherry timbering is profitable and there's a strong constituency that says all the land should be available for that use and it's unacceptable to set aside 12 percent of the forest for protection."

The Friends of the Allegh-

eny Wilderness' proposal, made after its members conducted a two-year forest inventory, was published in the fall of 2003 to coincide with, and attempt to influence, a revision to the forest's 10-year management plan. During that planning process the U.S. Forest Service received 8,200 public comments with more than 6,800 favoring the group's wilderness proposal.

The resulting Forest Service management plan, released in March 2007, proposed two new wilderness areas totaling 12,379 acres. That's not as much as Mr. Johnson would like, but he'd take it.

"Only a small percentage of the Allegheny qualifies for wilderness and unless we act soon," he said, "these areas of the forest could be lost to development, oil and gas drilling, timbering and roads."

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