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Green vs. green

A sensible path to Allegheny Forest wilderness

In northwest Pennsylvania lies the Allegheny National Forest — 513,000 acres of woodland used by hunters, hikers, campers, loggers and oil and gas explorers. About 75 miles from Pittsburgh, the land is a natural resource in Forest, Elk, McKean and Warren counties whose many uses under the law deserve strong protection and wise stewardship.

The U.S. Forest Service, as required by law, will revise within the next few years its resource management plan, the blueprint that determines how the forest will be used in the future. If the new plan has any value, it will significantly expand the forest's wilderness area.

"Wilderness" is a technical designation given by Congress to specific tracts of federally owned land for the purpose of preserving, or allowing it to return to, its natural state. In practical terms, that means a wilderness area in Allegheny National Forest may not be logged or drilled for oil or natural gas. Its roads would not only be closed but also obliterated. It would not contain a building or structure, though visitors would be welcome to hunt, fish, hike and explore. In short, it would exist — and be experienced — only in the way that the first humans found it.

Although the United States has vast wilderness areas — as of July 2000, 105 million acres — only two-tenths of 1 percent of them can be found in the 11 eastern states between Maine and Maryland. In the Allegheny National Forest, about 9,000 acres (less than 2 percent), is designated as wilderness. That compares with 18 percent of federally owned lands nationwide and 10 percent of federal lands in the East.

Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness, the Sierra Club and other groups are promoting a plan that would ask Congress, when it comes time to approve the next forest management plan, to expand the wilderness area to 8 percent of total acreage.

The proposed wilderness would include some old-growth forest that has never been logged, habitats where animal populations would benefit from less human activity and other tracts that would provide primitive recreation opportunities.

On paper and in theory, the wilderness expansion plan is a good one — and Pennsylvania's two senators and U.S. Rep. John Peterson, the Venango Republican whose House district includes the forest, should give it due consideration. But it will take additional study before Pennsylvanians can be sure of the plan's environmental and economic impact. Those results must also be factored into the equation.

Since federal law reserves national forests for a variety of uses — some of them economic and some which, quite frankly, sustain whole communities — we see no reason to take an extremist position when multiple tracts and thousands of acres are involved. Some could easily, and deservedly, become wilderness; others will not go without a fight from lawyers and lobbyists.

In the end, it may take a negotiated compromise — one that balances the acres most worthy of protection with those most valuable for mineral extraction — to get Congress to act on a wider wilderness designation. With Rep. Peterson and Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness willing to weigh the competing interests, the proposal is off to a promising start.