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Stop assault on public land

Oil and gas companies hold exploration and extraction leases for about 77 million acres of federal land, which they have not yet drilled. Yet a bill pending in Congress, the Wilderness Roadless Area Release Act, would open 43 million acres of protected lands to new leases, and the roads, logging and pollution that go with them.

And that's just one of more than a dozen bills, mostly in the House, that would severely limit federal protection of wildlife refuges, wilderness areas and other preserved land.

One of the oddest is the National Security and Federal Lands Protection Act, which would allow Customs and Border Patrol agencies to circumvent most conservation and environmental laws on all land within 100 miles of the borders with Canada and Mexico. That would include much of the Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania's only federally designated wilderness area.

The bill is based on the erroneous premise that environmental protection and immigration enforcement somehow are mutually exclusive concepts. The better course, as recommended by the Department of the Interior, is simple collaboration between the responsible agencies.

But the bill is part of a coordinated effort to severely limit preservation of existing public lands. One bill would allow uranium mining near the Grand Canyon. Another would mandate sales of millions of protected acres. The list is long.

The lands in question are part of the national heritage. Selling them or leasing them for exploitation by narrow interests favored by individual members of Congress would rob every American of part of their common heritage.