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Rescind support for legislation

By KIRK JOHNSON

A Congressman from California wants to put some of Pennsylvania's wildest forests at greater risk, and he has unfortunately been joined by a single Pennsylvania Congressman.

U.S. Rep. Kevin McCarthy's hostile bill targets millions of roadless acres of American wild lands, including some here in Pennsylvania. The bill, H.R. 1581 (the Wilderness and Roadless Areas Release Act), should be called the Great Outdoors Giveaway for it would strip protections for 25,000 pristine acres in the Allegheny National Forest.

As someone who has spent countless hours hiking through the Allegheny's backcountry, I find this bill to be an insult to the region. Not only does the Allegheny provide anglers with a great place to fish, it also provides families with a great atmosphere for canoeing and outdoor recreation. The region's older oak, black cherry, hemlock and white pine forests provide hunters with ideal habitat for deer and other game.

Four Allegheny forest tracts that qualify for wilderness designation under the Wilderness Act of 1964 – Allegheny Front, Clarion River, Cornplanter and Tracy Ridge – could be stripped of protections.

Even if one is not concerned with protecting Pennsylvania's wildest places, you may be interested in protecting its bottom line. In 2006 alone, more than four million Pennsylvanians went hunting, fishing or wildlife-watching, which generated more than \$4 billion for the state's economy.

This anti-wilderness proposal is also an affront to Pennsylvania's conservation legacy: Republican Congressman John P. Saylor of Johnstown was an original sponsor of the Wilderness Act of 1964 that has conserved land throughout the country. He was considered the father of the Act in the House of Representatives. A solitary Pennsylvania Congressman has abandoned Rep. Saylor's conservation legacy, and joined Congressman McCarthy's efforts. U.S. Rep. Glenn Thompson of Howard Township is a cosponsor of

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the Wilderness and Roadless Areas Release Act.

David J. Saylor, nephew of Congressman Saylor and board member for Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, recently observed the following: "I know my uncle would have rallied good people from both parties to oppose this blunderbuss 'Release Act.' Were he still in the Congress, I am confident he would have persuaded his colleagues from Pennsylvania and around the country that there is a better and more focused way to address these subjects. This unfortunate legislation's radical stripping away of vital protection from our precious remaining wildlands not yet officially designated as Wilderness Areas, as he would have explained, is harsh, unprecedented, and bad policy for Pennsylvania and the whole United States."

The position of Friends of Allegheny Wilderness is that we would like to see Congressman Thompson – and indeed all cosponsors – rescind support for this misguided bill. Further, we are asking that Congressman McCarthy withdraw H.R. 1581.

Rep. McCarthy's hometown newspaper, the Bakersfield Californian, recently editorialized against the Great Outdoors Giveaway bill, noting "the rumbling sound you may have noticed coming from the general vicinity of the Sierra Nevada is Teddy Roosevelt rolling over in his grave." Roosevelt, of course, was the early 20th century two-term Republican president widely considered to be the strongest conservationist president in our history.

In this day and age of widespread Marcellus shale development, we should all be working to permanently protect our last remnant wild areas, not working to open them up to development.

Kirk Johnson has been executive director for the Warren-based non-profit Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (www.pawild.org) since 2001.