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Audubon Pennsylvania joins coalition to protect ANF

WARREN — Audubon Pennsylvania has joined with six other conservation organizations as part of the fledgling Pennsylvania Wilderness Coalition, which was formed earlier this year.

The mission of the coalition is to support the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for the Allegheny National Forest.

National Audubon Society opened its Pennsylvania State Office in 1997 as the organization's tenth state office. Today, Audubon Pennsylvania has more than 24,000 members across the Commonwealth. Its mission is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and biological diversity in Pennsylvania.

"The Allegheny is located in the northwest corner of the state, but as Pennsylvania's only national forest, it belongs to all of us," said Phil Wallis, executive director for Audubon Pennsylvania. "Wilderness designation, under the Wilderness Act of 1964, for the most unbroken forest canopy tracts in the Allegheny will leave a permanent natural legacy benefiting future generations of bird populations, and indeed all native Allegheny Plateau wildlife species."

Wilderness designation by Congress is the strongest protection that can be given to federal lands, adding them to America's National Wilderness Preservation System. They are areas where by law natural processes are permitted to run their course in perpetuity, and where people are just visitors — using the areas to hunt, fish, hike, backpack, and for other forms of low-impact recreation.

The charter members of the Pennsylvania Wilderness Coalition were: Friends of Allegheny Wilderness; Sierra Club, Pennsylvania Chapter; Pennsylvania Division, Izaak Walton League of America; Pennsylvania Trout Unlimited; The Wilderness Society; and the Campaign for America's Wilderness of the Pew Environment Group.

With the addition of Audubon Pennsylvania as the seventh member organization, the coalition

now collectively represents more than 75,000 Pennsylvanians. The Coalition supports the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest, crafted by Friends of Allegheny Wilderness in 2003, which identifies 54,460 acres of wilderness-quality lands.

Only two areas on the Allegheny National Forest are currently protected as wilderness — the Hickory Creek Wilderness with about 8,600 acres, and the Allegheny Islands Wilderness, totaling fewer than 400 acres. That is less than two percent of the 513,300-acre Allegheny National Forest.

"Clearly there is a shortage of designated wilderness in Pennsylvania," said Dave Rothrock, president of Pennsylvania Trout Unlimited. "The areas identified in the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal are the most roadless and most undeveloped remaining portions of the Allegheny National Forest. They are one of our greatest public assets and provide refuge for naturally reproducing brook trout. We need to ensure they remain wild for our children and grandchildren."

"This is an issue for all of us who call Pennsylvania home," said David Sublette, federal public lands chair for the Sierra Club's Pennsylvania Chapter. "We have but one national forest. It is heavily used — more than a third of the nation's population is within a day's drive. If we do not move quickly to protect these undeveloped areas, they will be lost as the natural areas they are today."

Bob Stoudt, board president of the Warren-based Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, noted that 70 leading ecologists, biologists, and economists have signed a letter supporting wilderness designation for the areas identified in the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal.

"Many of us fully appreciate the aesthetic and even spiritual values of wilderness, but these scientists understand and stress the ecological and economic benefits to wilderness designation," Stoudt said. "They make it clear that permanent protection of these lands is important to maintaining the state's habitat types and biodiversity."