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Photo by Kirk Johnson

A group of hikers climb an embankment in the Chestnut Ridge Wilderness, located in the lowlands along the North Branch Sugar Run in Corydon Township. Chestnut Ridge represents a 5,000-acre tract of relatively untrammelled wilderness that provides high quality habitat for a variety of wildlife, including black bears, fishers and species of migratory songbirds dependent on unfragmented forest.

Coalition aims to make part of ANF wilderness

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Six conservation groups in Pennsylvania have joined forces to form the Pennsylvania Wilderness Coalition, a concerted effort to compel Congress to designate roughly 10 percent of the Allegheny National Forest as wilderness.

With combined memberships, the coalition

consists of nearly 65,000 citizens across the Commonwealth in support of the Citizen's Wilderness Proposal — a report developed by Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (FAW) in 2003 identifying 54,460 acres of particularly wild Allegheny National Forest lands to be permanently protected.

Supporting organizations include Friends of Allegheny Wilderness; The Sierra Club,

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Pennsylvania Chapter; Pennsylvania Division, Izaak Walton League of America; Pennsylvania Trout Unlimited; The Wilderness Society; and the PEW Environment Group.

"These six groups have endorsed the Citizen's Wilderness Proposal for a long time," said FAW Executive Director Kirk Johnson on Monday. "It's no longer just a formal endorsement, they will be working in the campaign in a direct, concerted way and actively contributing staff, volunteer time and resources."

Johnson said after more than a year of discussions, the groups decided to turn the campaign into a "statewide effort to the greatest degree possible to protect parts of Pennsylvania's only national forest."

"It takes an act of Congress to designate wilderness," he continued. "Those areas then become part of the National Wilderness Preservation System and are required by law to remain in their natural condition."

Johnson said that the proposal has now been signed by 67 leading scientists in the fields of ecology, biology and the like who recognize the urgency of such a designation given the growing pressures of industry and development in the areas.

"National forest land is managed for multiple uses, but it's good to establish a balance of use across the forest," Johnson explained. "A designation for the proposed areas would allow us to establish an important kind of wildlife habitat, highly natural and undisturbed."

He said it took two years of field studies to choose the nearly 54,000 acres which were decided upon due to their being "relatively untrammelled by man — unrestrained by the acts of man with few roads and oil wells — the most natural and pristine areas that still exists in the area."

There are currently approximately 9,000 acres protected as wilderness in Pennsylvania that are no longer open to logging, road building or development, according to Johnson.

"Eighteen percent of all national forest land in the country is currently designated wilderness and in the east it's more like 11 percent," Johnson said. "If we were to get all of our areas in the proposal designated by congress, that would really bring wilderness representation in the Allegheny up to something that is commensurate with other eastern national forests."

John Bartlett of the Izaak Walton League of America said his group supports the campaign in order to "set aside a legacy that will live forever for generations to come and preserve the very best of what we have of our natural heritage."

According to Johnson, conserving wilderness is a kind of long-term investment that protects those proposed areas that are of far more value as they are than they would be once exhausted for the short term gain of a few by their conversion into marketable goods.

"Designating wilderness areas precipitates a myriad of economic benefits for people that extend far into the future," he said. "Some of those are increased property values, growth in outdoor recreation industries and quality of life, as well as ecosystem services which are indispensable and would be nearly impossible to replicate by society."

"The ANF belongs to everyone equally," Johnson added. "It is federal public lands and everyone's tax dollars — whether you live in Pennsylvania or Hawaii — contributes to the stewardship of the forests there so everyone should be able to the ecological services and other benefits there. You don't have to pay a fee to enter the wilderness."