

Friends of Allegheny Wilderness president explains mission

By BOB STOUDT

I am honored to write today as the new President of the Board of Directors for the Warren-based non-profit organization Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (FAW). Though other organizations seek to eliminate logging in the Allegheny National Forest (ANF) and oppose all oil and gas activities, FAW seeks instead to foster cooperation among seemingly opposing interests to protect additional areas in the ANF as wilderness while respecting the need to ensure a sustainable, economically viable future for the entire region.

It is by no means an easy or universally accepted way of doing things, but I strongly believe it is the correct way.

However, I realize that just as FAW and our supporters feel confident in the rightness of our cause, so too do those on the other side of the wilderness debate. It is with respect for the legitimate interests of those who disagree with FAW's mission that we work toward additional wilderness designations in the ANF.

What is wilderness? Ask any number of people to define wilderness and you'll probably get a different answer from each of them.

Some may offer the official Wilderness Act of 1964 definition of "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

Others will offer something more personal: a completely natural area where one can get away from the hectic pace of everyday life and truly reconnect with nature; an area where human influence is as remote as possible in today's world; a chance to get lost, if only for a short time.

To me, wilderness is each of these things and more. It is cherishing the increasingly rare wild places that still exist – those 'blank' places on the map – and realizing that their untrammelled nature is what makes them so special and worthy of our best efforts for permanent protection. It is knowing that the next time we go back to those special places, we won't be mortified to find a new road, a new gas well or a new timber cut where our favorite places once stood.

Wilderness has never been as precious or as

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threatened as it is today.

The very idea runs counter to many of the driving forces of our modern society. Each day, we lose more and more of what was wild only the day before. New roads are being built, new subdivisions go up, new oil and gas wells are drilled.

Pennsylvania is facing a crushing onslaught of new oil and gas exploration, much of it linked to the Marcellus Shale deposits. The ANF region is not being spared. Because the subsurface mineral rights in the vast majority of the ANF are not owned by the Forest Service, the private owners of those rights are legally allowed to develop their resources as long as they follow basic environmental protections. Areas of the ANF that had for so long seemed remote and sheltered are proving to be neither.

FAW has been working for a decade to build support for additional wilderness designation in the ANF. Our Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest is an exceptionally well-reasoned justification for doing so. If you have not already read the document, please get a copy today. It is available on our website at www.pawild.org, along with a wealth of other useful information.

Our challenge is not easy. If it was, it would almost certainly have been completed already. 'Friends' of Allegheny wilderness – in one name or another – have been trying to protect wilderness areas here since the late 1960s. The obstacles facing us include: limited funding; lack of ownership of subsurface mineral rights; political resistance from some elected officials and resource extraction interests; limited support from the Forest Service; and relentless pressure from continued oil and gas development. Piece of cake, right?

We really do need all interested citizens to get involved today. Our mission is noble and good, and it is worthy of your support. On behalf of FAW's Board of Directors, I thank you, and I hope to see you out in the woods sometime soon!

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bstoudt@pawild.org