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Photo courtesy of Dr. Scott Bearer

Representatives from conservation and governmental agencies huddle around a map of the Allegheny National Forest area to pinpoint places of priority to funnel resources to save hemlock trees from extinction. An invasive species known as the hemlock woolly adelgid has already devastated forests in the southern U.S. and now has been identified in the state tree in the Pennsylvania Wilds.

Workshop to save hemlock trees held at Pitt-Bradford

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Hemlock, the state tree which once comprised the majority of Pennsylvania's forests, may be on its way out of existence.

Hemlock Woolly Adelgid, a small aphid-[redacted] devastated southern U.S. [redacted] recently been found to [redacted] way to the Pennsylvania Wilds.

On Thursday, several agencies, organizations and stakeholders took part in the second workshop of the High Allegheny Hemlock Conservation Project held collaboratively by the U.S. Forest Service and the Pennsylvania Chapter of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) at the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford.

The group was made up of representatives from the forest service, TNC, New York Department of Environmental Conservation, New York State Parks, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Pennsylvania Game Commission, Pennsylvania and New York natural heritage programs, Kinzua Fish and Wildlife Association, McKean County Conservation District, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, McKean County Commissioners and several private companies such as timber investment and management groups.

Also collaborating are representatives from Cook Forest State Park, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection and other county officials, though they were not able to be present on Thursday.

Together, they poured over maps and data depicting the location of hemlock trees, areas of high species diversity, exceptional value waterways and other ecological and social values to pinpoint the most important places to try to save from the terminal effects of the invasive species.

"Unfortunately, with limited funds and the high expense of treatment, we must choose the best places to funnel resources," said TNC Conservation GIS analyst Sarah Johnson.

TNC forest ecologist and senior scientist Dr. Scott Bearer told *The Era* there are different options in the form of treatment against the pest, including chemical and biological treatments, but they can be "pretty expensive."

The 10 map areas analyzed by the participating representatives surrounded the Allegheny National Forest, covering all or parts of McKean, Potter, Elk, Cameron, Forest, Jefferson, Warren and Venango counties in Pennsylvania; as well as parts of Cattaraugus and Allegany counties in New York state.

In Map Area 1, comprising a large portion of Cattaraugus County and Allegany State Park, the Red House Brook and Barker Run areas were identified for high densities of hemlock, public recreation and fishing access.

In Map Area 2, comprising much of Allegany County and the Allegany State Park, the experts said there were only two areas with hemlock conglomerates — neither large nor continuous — were located southwest of Wellsville, N.Y.

In Map Area 3, split between McKean and Warren counties, several areas were discussed as priorities. These included the north branch of Sugar Run as a diverse wildlife habitat with high quality cold water fisheries and recreation.

Brook Run was targeted for its exceptional value water quality, but the presence of oil and gas activity was noted as detracting from it being an ideal candidate for being saved. The same was said of Morrison Run, though they mentioned its large hemlock and conifer components.

The confluence of Kinzua Creek and Mead Run was identified for its large recreational use, wetlands and large diameter conifers. Nelse Run and the south branch of Kinzua Creek were targeted for being special areas with unique habitat and fisheries, while Tracy Ridge Natural Recreation Area was pinpointed as a nearly roadless, recreational and proposed wilderness area.

The upper Four-Mile Run, which runs into Tionesta Creek near Sheffield, was noted for its large, old hemlocks that provide creek shade for wildlife habitat and fishing. The experts pointed to Wildcat Run near Ludlow for its extensive hemlock tracts and habitat value.

In Map Area 5, comprising mostly Warren County, Minister Creek, Heart's Content, East Hickory Creek, Ander's Run, Farnsworth area, Chapman State Park and Blue Jay Creek were pinpointed. The experts said Heart's Content needs no explanation, being an exceptional old growth wildlife habitat, and East Hickory Creek is special due to the coniferous wetlands there.

In Map Area 6, split between Cameron and McKean counties, they picked out Swamp Creek, Little Black Brook (located south of Cyclone), White Fall Run and Crooked Creek for having many endangered species and biologically diverse core areas.

In Map Area 7, comprising mostly Forest County, Henry's Mill area, Kelletville Area and the Tionesta Scenic and Natural areas were targeted due to an abundance of contiguous hemlock, element occurrences and rare habitat communities.

In Map Area 8, comprising mostly Venango County, Oil Creek, Caldwell Creek (located northeast of Titusville) and Samuel Creek were identified for their water quality, fisheries and rare species.

Map Area 9 is split between Jefferson and Forest counties and encompasses current infestations of the adelgid. Highlighted here were Upper Big Coon area, Cather's Run, Salmon Creek, Maple Creek and Coleman Run areas for recreation and aesthetic values along with habitat and rare wildlife communities. The experts also pointed to Cook Forest and Clear Creek state parks which scored high on every category.

In April, the pest was discovered in Cook Forest, where treatment has already begun there. It has also been found in the southern portion of the ANF, the Quehanna Wild Area and Elk State Forest. It can spread up to 18 kilometers per year and jump large distances when carried on the wind.

The results of the workshop will be compiled and made available online for public comment, then reviewed by an expert. Johnson said she hopes a proposal and applications for funding for treatment will be underway by spring 2014.

The next step is to establish a Cooperative Forest Pest Management Area throughout which people can apply for funding to eradicate the pest. They plan to work with North Carolina State University to archive seeds and cones should the species be eradicated entirely.