

THE BUFFALO NEWS

BUFFALONEWS.COM

Copyright 2009

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2009

Serving Western New York since 1880

WESTERN NEW YORK EDITION

Preserve more wilderness

Allegheny National Forest has places that offer chance for eastern reserves

One of the signs of positive change in Washington last month was the breaking of a Senate logjam that had, for far too long, held up the designation of more than 2 million acres of federally owned land as wilderness — forever wild.

That should create the necessary momentum, not only for the same measure to be approved in the House, but also for 54,000 acres of the Allegheny National Forest in western Pennsylvania to win the same top level of federal protection.

Even though the bill approved in late January protects wilderness in nine states from Oregon to Virginia, and acquires more land in Alaska that will go into the same pipeline, none of it lies in the Northeast. Proposals to designate eight tracts in the ANF as wilderness would help our region catch up in this important area.

Wilderness protection is something that can be granted only by an act of Congress. No president or secretary can order it in by midnight rule. That's because it is a serious step, taken to set aside the most precious acres of land in a condition that is, as much as possible, as it would have been seen by the first human being to venture there.

No roads. No farming, mining, drilling, logging. No motorized vehicles of any kind. Not even bicycles. What is allowed is what people can do on two feet or, in some cases, on four hooves. Fishing, hunting, hiking, birdwatching and communing with nature in a way that modern humanity knows far too little about.

Wilderness preservation is not only good karma for the American people who own the land, and for the government that manages it in our name. It is also good business for nearby communities that generally benefit by selling every-

thing from hiking boots to trail mix to the many visitors who flock there every year. An acre of wilderness land, experts argue, generates \$44 a year in economic activity for nearby communities, plus other benefits that include the air and water that are filtered by the mature trees and firm soil for the benefit of people who live many miles away.

Senators who apparently think the only good acre is a paved acre — or at least one with an oil rig sticking through it — had used that body's arcane rules to block for more than a year several different bills that would have given wilderness designation to selected areas. But last month, behind the somewhat emboldened Democratic leader Harry Reid, the Senate lumped what had been 160 different bills into the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 and passed it by a vote of 73-21.

Both New York senators — including, in one of her last Senate actions, Hillary Clinton — properly voted for the measure.

New York's congressional delegation should now be among the active supporters of wilderness protection for parcels in the Allegheny National Forest, which lies just across the Pennsylvania border from New York's Chautauqua and Cattaraugus counties, as identified by an independent survey and supported by a long list of scientists, economists and business leaders of the region.

Vast swaths of the Western United States are owned by the federal government, a legacy of the days when they were territories governed directly from Washington. Thus it has been easier for large areas in those states to win wilderness protection. But back East, where greater urbanization puts even more pressure on fragile landscapes, even federally owned land hasn't received the level of protection it deserves. More wilderness set aside in the ANF would help remedy that problem.