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Designate the wilderness

Pennsylvania groups deserve support for Allegheny National Forest proposal

Congress should support an effort by six conservation organizations, representing nearly 65,000 Pennsylvanians, to gain wilderness designation for parts of the Allegheny National Forest, that state's only national forest and a natural area well within the reach of Western New Yorkers.

The coalition is backing the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest, a measure designed by Friends of Allegheny Wilderness in 2003. The proposal identifies 54,460 acres of wilderness-quality lands in the forest.

Wilderness designation by Congress is the highest level of protection that can be given to federal lands, and would add the acreage to the National Wilderness Preservation System as areas meant for nature and people without technology — cars, bicycles or any other device not available to those who first walked this earth.

The coalition includes the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, The Sierra Club's Pennsylvania Chapter, the Pennsylvania division of the Izaak Walton League of America, Pennsylvania Trout Unlimited, The Wilderness Society and the Campaign for America's Wilderness of the Pew Environment Group. That consortium will devote staff, volunteer time and resources to working directly on this campaign.

An early goal will be trying to get the state's congressional delegation to introduce legislation to protect the existing wilderness areas within the forest.

Last year the U.S. Senate acted on designation of more than 2 million acres of federally-owned land as wilderness. Democratic leader Sen. Harry Reid and the Senate lumped what had been 160 different bills into the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009. This was the vehicle used to get sweeping land legislation passed, accounting for the large expanse of designated land.

Another omnibus public lands bill before the end of this Congress is possible. If that happens, wilderness legislation for the Allegheny National Forest should be included.

The Allegheny National Forest, in western Pennsylvania, is on our doorstep.

Without an omnibus bill, Pennsylvania Democratic Sens. Arlen Specter, who will remain in office until next January, and Bob Casey should move forward with a stand-alone bill

specific to the Allegheny National Forest.

Both New York senators, including Hillary Clinton shortly before she left office, supported earlier versions of this effort, and the same backing is needed from Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand.

The Allegheny National Forest, in western Pennsylvania, is on our doorstep. It's a national reserve, not just a state one, and it lies just across the Pennsylvania border from New York's Chautauqua and Cattaraugus counties. A tremendous number of forest visitors come from Buffalo, Rochester, Jamestown, Olean, Salamanca and elsewhere in Western New York to go hunting, fishing and backpacking. This effort deserves our attention, and our support.