



FUTURE WILDERNESS?— The mouth of Bear Creek, located opposite the village of Portland Mills, would fall within a new wilderness area being proposed by the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness. The area currently is part of the Allegheny National Forest.

Photo by Imhof

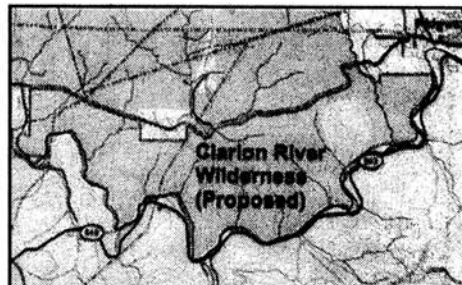
Wilderness areas proposed for Elk County; the ANF seeks input on forest plan

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ST. MARYS — Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness, an environmental advocacy group that supports both sustainable forestry and wilderness, has proposed two wilderness areas designation for a stretch of the Clarion River south of Ridgway and the Brush Hollow complex in northern Elk County.

The first proposal, designated as the Clarion River Roadless Area, would set aside roughly 6,000 acres for uses such as hiking, hunting, fishing and other recreational activities, while precluding logging and road building within the zone.

The area extends from near the Ridgway Country Club Property to and including the ghost town of Arroyo. The



The area being proposed for wilderness designation along the Clarion River stretches from roughly the Elk County Country Club to the ghost town of Arroyo. Several private inholdings exist within the roughly 6,300 acres. These areas would be unaffected by the proposed classification.

Map from the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness

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Wilderness areas

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northern boundary of the property is designated by the Spring Creek (also known as the Laurel Mill or Hallton) Road. Approximately 14 miles of river frontage would be included in the wilderness zone.

Presently, the Clarion River Corridor is experiencing a rapid growth in use as a recreational asset. Canoers and campers from areas around the country have discovered the rich scenic beauty of the area and are coming in increasing numbers each year. The land along the northern shore is currently part of the Allegheny National Forest, with the exception of a large private inholding along the southern stretch of Big Mill Creek and several smaller inholdings dispersed throughout the 6,000 acres.

Also contained within the proposed wilderness are several archeological sites related to county and lumbering history.

Second to be proposed is the Brush Hollow Complex on the upper end of Big Mill Creek. That area is already a specialized management area and is not presently open to logging or other industrial activities. Several trails have been constructed along the upper end of Big Mill Creek and that system has proven to be popular with local hikers, fishermen and hunters.

It is also important to note that Big Mill Creek is the stream that provides drinking water for the town of Ridgway.

Input on these wilderness areas and other aspects of the management of the Allegheny National Forest are currently being sought as part of a three-year process to revise the forest's management plan. The management plan is the guiding document for the forest and essentially influences

all activities undertaken by the forest service for the term of the plan.

Throughout 2003, ANF personnel will be conducting public meetings throughout the Allegheny region. These meetings are intended to gather information and opinion from the many individuals and groups that will be affected by the forest plan.

According to Kirk Johnson, executive director for the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, his organization has specifically targeted areas that are not considered to be prime logging or gas areas when proposing new wilderness. This approach, according to Johnson, recognizes that timber extraction and energy production are important components of the economies for communities that border the ANF.

"We believe that wilderness and logging can co-exist on the forest," Johnson said in a recent interview.

On the whole, the Allegheny National Forest lags behind other eastern forests in the percentage of acres dedicated to wilderness. Generally, eastern forests have roughly 10 percent of their total land base set aside as wilderness. The ANF has less than two percent of its over 500,000 acres under that designation.

Under current management, only 9,000 acres in two zones are classified and managed as wilderness areas within the ANF. Those areas, Hickory Creek south of Warren and the Allegheny River Islands, were designated under the original Wilderness Act of 1964. Additional lands were supported for wilderness protection in 1975 under the eastern Wilderness Act, and had the support of Pennsylvania's two Republican senators. However, the bill was blocked when it reached the House of Representatives.

Under current legislation, there is only one way for an area to be designated as federal wilderness. The area must be proposed before and receive the support of Congress. While the designations are generally recommended through the local forest plan, it is possible for a congressman to propose an area on his or her own.

This means that Congressman John Peterson could propose wilderness areas within the ANF at any time, with or without a recommendation from the ANF.

Johnson stated he believes additional wilderness areas with the ANF will serve to diversify the region's economy by providing areas that are specifically geared toward outdoor recreation.

This opinion, quite naturally, is not shared by all groups. For example, the Allegheny Forest Alliance has come out strongly against any additional wilderness designations. In fact, that organization has publicly stated that it would prefer to see the currently designation wilderness areas ended rather than adding new lands.

Clearly, the issue of wilderness within the ANF will be contentious. The Forest Service is actively seeking public input, as are organizations like the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness and the Allegheny Forest Alliance.

Further background on the forest revision plan can be obtained by visiting the ANF web site at www.fs.fed.us/r9/allegheny.