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Sports & Outdoors

New Wilderness Advocacy Coalition Formed

Six conservation organizations, representing nearly 65,000 Pennsylvanians, have joined to form the Pennsylvania Wilderness Coalition. The new group will advocate for wilderness designation on the Allegheny National Forest – the state's only National Forest.

"The Allegheny is located in the northwest corner of the state, but as Pennsylvania's only National Forest, it belongs to all of us," said Adam Hostetler of Lebanon, vice president of the Pennsylvania Division, Izaak Walton League of America. "Wilderness designation for some of the most pristine and wild areas on the Allegheny will leave a permanent natural legacy for future generations, so they can forever hike, hunt, camp and explore here."

Wilderness designation by Congress is the highest level of protection that can be given to federal lands, adding them to the National Wilderness Preservation System as areas where nature reigns and people are just visitors.

Founding members of

the Pennsylvania Wilderness Coalition are: Friends of Allegheny Wilderness; The Sierra Club, Pennsylvania Chapter; Pennsylvania Division, Izaak Walton League of America; Pennsylvania Trout Unlimited; The Wilderness Society and the Campaign for America's Wilderness of the Pew Environment Group.

The Coalition supports the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest, crafted by Friends of Allegheny Wilderness in 2003, which identifies 54,460 acres of wilderness-quality lands on the ANF.

Today, only two areas on the Allegheny National Forest are permanently protected as wilderness – the Hickory Creek Wilderness with about 8,600 acres, and the Allegheny Islands Wilderness, totaling just under 400 acres. That is less than two percent of the 513,000-acre Allegheny National Forest.

"Clearly there is a shortage of designated wilderness on our National Forest," said Dave

Rothrock, president of Pennsylvania Trout Unlimited. "The areas identified in the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal are the remaining roadless and most untouched natural areas on the Allegheny National Forest. They are one of our greatest public assets and provide refuge for naturally reproducing brook trout. We need to ensure they remain wild for our children and grandchildren."

"This is an issue for all of us who call Pennsylvania home," said David Sublette of the Sierra Club. "We have but one National Forest. It is heavily used – more than a third of the nation's population is within a day's drive. If we do not move quickly to protect these undeveloped areas, they will be lost as the natural areas they are today. Senators Arlen Specter and Robert P. Casey and the state's entire Congressional delegation must be encouraged to act now."

Bob Stoudt, board president of the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, noted that more than 65 leading ecologists, biolo-

gists and economists have signed a letter supporting Wilderness designation for the areas identified in the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal.

"Many of us fully appreciate the aesthetic and even spiritual values of wilderness, but these scientists understand and stress the ecological and economic benefits to wilderness designation," Stoudt said. "They make it clear that permanent protection of these lands is important to maintaining the state's habitat types and biodiversity."

For more information about the Pennsylvania Wilderness Coalition, please contact: Kirk Johnson at kjohnson@pawild.org. For more information on the Citizens' Proposal for Wilderness on the Allegheny National Forest please visit www.pawild.org.

The Pennsylvania Wilderness Coalition is working to designate wilderness on the Allegheny National Forest -- Pennsylvania's only National Forest.