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Wilderness Coalition

Six groups join forces to push for expansion of ANF wilderness

By DEAN WELLS

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A new coalition representing nearly 65,000 Pennsylvanians has been formed to advocate for increased wilderness in the Allegheny National Forest.

Six different conservation groups - Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness (FAW); 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 - have thrown their support behind FAW's Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest.

The Pennsylvania Wilderness Coalition, as the group is calling itself, plans to advocate for more wilderness designation in the Allegheny National Forest via a statewide campaign.

"It was a collective decision," said FAW executive director Kirk Johnson regarding the formation of the coalition. "All of the groups read through the Citizens' Proposal at some years ago and endorsed it.

They felt a strong need to make the proposal come to fruition."

Johnson said the six organizations that make up the coalition began talking a year and a half ago about joining forces.

"This goes beyond simply endorsing the proposal," Johnson said. "They are providing significant staff and resources. We've joined together on a real concen-

trated effort to push this forward legislatively."

According to Johnson, coalition members traveled to Washington, D.C. in April and met with local congressional representatives Glen Thompson and Kathy Dahlkemper, along with staff members from the offices of U.S.

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Senators Arlen Specter and Bob Casey, to discuss the possibility of designating more wilderness area in the Allegheny National Forest.

"It was pretty positive," Johnson said. "We told them we hoped for their support in the future."

The Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness's proposal identifies over 54,000 acres of wilderness-quality land in the national forest.

Currently, there are two designated wilderness areas in the ANF - the Hickory Creek Wilderness Area (approximately 8,600 acres) and the Allegheny Islands Wilderness (just under 400 acres).

The two wilderness areas make up less than two percent of the Allegheny National Forest's 513,000 acres.

"Clearly there is a shortage of designated wilderness in 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 ar-

reas 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," David Sublette of the Sierra Club said. "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 Casey and the state's entire congressional delegation must be encouraged to act now."

For more information on the Pennsylvania Wilderness Coalition, contact Johnson at kjohnson@pawild.org.

For more information on the Citizen's Wilderness Proposal, visit www.pawild.org.