



*Friends of Allegheny Wilderness seeks to foster an appreciation of wilderness values and benefits, and to work with local communities to ensure that increased wilderness protection is a priority of the stewardship of the Allegheny National Forest.*

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**CONSERVATION GROUP: CONGRESS, NOT FOREST SERVICE, IS DECIDER ON WILDERNESS  
Tracy Ridge – largest roadless area in ANF – spurned by Forest Plan**

**Warren** – The non-profit conservation group Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (FAW), a proponent of wilderness protection on the Allegheny National Forest (ANF), responded cautiously today to the publication of the new Forest Plan for the ANF.

A copy of the plan, released to the general public today, was delivered to FAW by mail on Wednesday, providing the group an early look.

“We are pleased that the revised plan includes two areas recommended for permanent protection under the Wilderness Act of 1964, while at the same time providing for timber production and other uses elsewhere on the forest,” said Kirk Johnson, the group’s executive director. “However, the plan still largely overlooks the desires of more than 80 percent of citizens who sent in comments on last year’s draft plan – and who sought wilderness designation for all of the areas we proposed as wilderness.”

The public overwhelmingly supports protecting more wilderness on the ANF, according to an analysis of citizen comments. Of the 8,277 public comments the U.S. Forest Service received on the draft plan, more than 6,800 specifically favored the maximum amount of wilderness as outlined in FAW’s *Citizens’ Wilderness Proposal for Pennsylvania’s Allegheny National Forest*.

The *Citizens’ Wilderness Proposal*, published in the fall of 2003 following several years of intense on-the-ground study, identifies eight areas totaling 54,460 acres as potential additions to America’s National Wilderness Preservation System. Several of these tracts, such as the proposed Tracy Ridge Wilderness Area, are formally recognized Roadless Areas and areas that members of Pennsylvania’s Congressional delegation advocated to protect as wilderness in the past.

The new Forest Plan recommends to Congress just two tracts – Chestnut Ridge and Minister Valley – totaling approximately 13,000 acres as wilderness areas. The final plan surprisingly reversed the draft plan’s proposed recommendation of Tracy Ridge – the largest Roadless Area

in the ANF at more than 9,500 acres – for wilderness despite overwhelming public support for that initial proposal.

“We are glad to see portions of the *Citizens’ Wilderness Proposal* recognized by the agency,” noted John Bartlett, the group’s field representative. “However, all eight areas local citizens have recommended for wilderness designation should continue to be considered by the residents of the region and Pennsylvania’s Congressional delegation. Bear in mind the areas that were excluded were done so at the subjective discretion of the Forest Service, and **not** because they don’t qualify under the Wilderness Act.”

“It’s true that almost two-thirds of the special places in the *Citizens’ Wilderness Proposal* have been recognized by the plan as having wilderness characteristics – either as recommended wilderness areas, remote recreation areas, or national recreation areas,” observed Ron Simonsen, a FAW board member and life-long resident of Warren. “We applaud that and the work that went into this process. However, we will continue to ask our members of Congress to truly protect all eight places we identified in our proposal as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System.”

While the Forest Plan establishes management guidelines that will govern most of the ANF for the next 10 to 15 years or longer, wilderness is the one area over which the Forest Service can only make a recommendation. The final decision on wilderness designation is Congress’ alone – and therefore the public’s through their elected representatives.

“We will continue our efforts toward meeting the desires of those who favor the maximum amount of wilderness, working with the Forest Service, practical minded stakeholders, and our elected officials,” Johnson said. “Members of the public should contact their Congressmen and Senators and let them know of their desire for more wilderness. It’s the Congress that will ultimately be the decider about protecting more wilderness in Pennsylvania for future generations to use and enjoy.”

“We urge everyone to take the time to read and digest the entire management plan and environmental impact statement, and bear in mind the needs and demands of all users of the Allegheny National Forest, including the vast majority who desire more wilderness,” Bartlett added.

To date, 21 separate local, regional, and national organizations have formally moved to endorse the *Citizens’ Wilderness Proposal*. The memberships of these organizations represent more than 400,000 Americans. The most recent addition was the Pennsylvania Division of the Izaak Walton League of America, which unanimously voted to join the ranks of the coalition at their state convention in York this past Saturday.

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Online:

Friends of Allegheny Wilderness: [www.pawild.org](http://www.pawild.org)

Allegheny National Forest: [www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/allegheny](http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/allegheny)