



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.

For Immediate Release: October 26, 2010

Contact: Kirk Johnson, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, 814-723-0620

Obama Administration Throws Weight Behind Model Wilderness Legislation Cooperative Bill for Montana Lands Would Designate 680,000 Acres of Wilderness

WARREN – Conservationists throughout Pennsylvania are hailing the most recent development in cooperative efforts to increase logging and protect 680,000 acres of wilderness on Montana national forest lands.

Sen. Jon Tester's (D-MT) sweeping proposal to designate Montana's first new wilderness in more than a quarter-century in exchange for timber harvesting across 100,000 acres of national forest land received a key endorsement from President Obama's Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, potentially paving the way for the bill's passage in the remaining days of the Senate calendar.

"I, my staff at USDA, and Chief Tidwell stand ready to assist you in moving this legislation forward" Secretary Vilsack wrote in his letter of support to Tester.

An act of the U.S. Congress is required to add qualifying portions of federal public land to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Since the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964, the Congress has passed 140 wilderness laws protecting in perpetuity nearly 110 million acres of qualifying federal public lands around the country.

In his letter to Tester, Vilsack said the bill's requirement to "mechanically treat" 100,000 acres of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge and Kootenai national forests over the next 15 years is "ambitious, but sustainable and achievable."

Conservation groups such as Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, the Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, and others have similarly been working with timber industry representatives and other stakeholder groups dating back to 2001 to come to an agreement for the future management of the Allegheny National Forest – the state's only national forest.

"This Obama Administration endorsement of Senator Tester's bill bodes well for other progressive movements around the country," said Kirk Johnson, executive director for Friends of Allegheny Wilderness. "Hopefully it can serve as just the catalyst we need to move forward to protect new wilderness and maintain timber harvest levels in the Allegheny in perpetuity," he continued.

"The idea that you can either have wilderness protection *or* timber harvest in the Allegheny – but not both – is a false dichotomy perpetuated by the extremes on the right and left," Johnson added. "We can do both. In fact we should do both, not just out of sheer pragmatism but because it is the right thing to do for the region."

Tester's bill has maintained support among other environmental groups, including the Montana Wilderness Association, the National Wildlife Federation and Trout Unlimited, as well as timber companies and recreation outfitters – an unconventional alliance that could help make the bill a “model” for other public lands proposals, Vilsack said.

“The holistic package of mechanical treatments, wilderness designations, and job creation, along with the collaborative approach and hard work of the stakeholders in Montana, and your work directly with the Forest Service, ensure that this legislation can serve as a model for similar efforts elsewhere,” he wrote.

Martin Nie, a professor of natural resources policy at the University of Montana, said that if Tester's bill becomes a legislative model for wilderness proposals, it could help other similar bills gain political traction in Washington, D.C.

“Perhaps the most important question related to Tester's bill is the precedent that would be established in legislating timber treatment mandates on national forests.” Nie said. “What might those treatment mandates look like in other proposals if such legislation is now politically acceptable?”

“A lot of groups are paying particular attention to Senator Tester's bill and how it is received in D.C., as it will send an important cue to these other initiatives and how they might move forward,” Nie said.

Montana Wilderness Association president Daphne Herling said of Senator Tester's bill, “the Montana Wilderness Association is proud to be part of the broad coalition of people who came together to find made-in-Montana solutions to restore our forests, help our communities, and protect some of our most magnificent landscapes for Montana families to forever enjoy.”

FAW published the *Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest* in 2003. The ubiquitously supported proposal identifies eight areas totaling 54,460 acres as prospective additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System. During the recently completed ANF Forest Plan revision, more than 6,800 of 8,200 public comments received by the agency specifically advocated for FAW and the *Citizens' Wilderness Proposal*.

Currently there are just two designated wilderness areas in the ANF – the Hickory Creek and Allegheny Islands Wildernesses. Together they total approximately 9,000 acres, or less than two percent of the 513,300-acre ANF. Other national forests around the East have on average approximately 11 percent of their land designated as wilderness.

Finally, FAW has recently joined with six other conservation organizations to form the Pennsylvania Wilderness Coalition in a concerted statewide effort to compel Congress to designate more of the ANF as wilderness. Member organizations are FAW; Audubon Pennsylvania; 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. The coalition supports the *Citizens' Wilderness Proposal*.

#