ALLEGHENY

Revise National Forest plan to protect state's wilderness

Of the 513,325 acres that make up the Allegheny National Forest, the only national forest in Pennsylvania, only a little over 9,000 acres is designated as wilderness and legally protected from timber harvesting and other human disturbances. Among all national forests, that is one of the smallest percentages of protected wilderness in the system.

In the purest sense of the word, little of the Allegheny constitutes virgin forest, woods untouched by human activities. Indeed, much of what today is the Allegheny National Forest was largely cleared land 100 years ago. When the national forest was established in 1923, it was referred to as brushland.

But one of the great attributes of the forests of the eastern United States, unlike those in other parts of the planet, is its ability to regenerate. While the current forest hardly resembles the one that existed before settlers began clearing the land for farms, industrial timber harvesters set up their saw mills and cleared out the remaining trees, and some 7,000 oil and natural gas wells were drilled, accompanied by thousands of miles of road and pipes. But there remain pockets of undisturbed second-growth forest eminently worthy of preservation.

The Forest Service, as part of a regular 10- to 15-year review, has proposed four different land-use plans for the coming decade, only one of which gives even modest consideration to expanded wilderness protection. “Alternative D” would protect the wild areas of Tracy Ridge, Chestnut Ridge, Allegheny Front and Mineral Valley, but it leaves out similarly wild areas at Clarion River, Complianter, Morrison Run, Tionesta and an additional 1,800 acres of the existing Hickory Creek wilderness area that have been proposed for protection by citizens’ groups.

The Allegheny itself is testament to the fact that a forest can always be destroyed, and that in doing so it is never the same again. Preserving the forest and allowing nature to take its course is, history demonstrates, a much more difficult course of action.

People, even those entrusted with administering the nation’s natural resources, are more disposed to seek to satisfy the great maw of human consumption rather than preserve nature in its pristine state not only for the benefit of future generations but for the simple reason that raw nature deserves our respect and our efforts to sustain some significant portion of it.

We call upon the Forest Service to revise Alternative D to include all roadless areas that remain in the Allegheny National Forest to provide nature at least a fighting chance to survive on public lands ostensibly established to ensure the existence of a credible forest habitat in perpetuity.