

FRIDAY FORUM What does the future hold for the Allegheny National Forest as the U.S Forest Service reviews management options?

Balanced future requires intelligent, bipartisan decisions

In the Friday Forum, we pose a question on crucial issues to various community leaders and members, as well as authorities on certain topics, then publish their responses.

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Future Forums: Congressmen Phil English and John Peterson on record federal budget deficits.

Northwest Pennsylvania is blessed with a beautiful landscape. Tall forests, carpets of ferns, and the blaze of autumn foliage have long shaped the region's identity. Much of these forests have been managed by the U.S. Forest Service since 1923. Right now, the Forest Service is revising their plan for the future management of the Allegheny National Forest. As that process gains momentum, it offers a reminder of the important place of northwest Pennsylvania in the nation's conservation tradition.

Two western Pennsylvanians — U.S. Congressman John P. Saylor and Howard Zahniser of the Wilderness Society — were the architects of the Wilderness Act of 1964, a landmark conservation law. Saylor, a strong Republican committed to economic growth and responsible government, also prized the lands that make America unique. In his words, "We Americans are the people we are largely because we have had the influence of the wilderness on our lives."

Representative Saylor was the Wilderness Act's champion in the House of Representatives. Zahniser, a native of Tionesta, grew up exploring the forests and rivers of the Allegheny Valley. He dedicated the last decade of his life to the passage of the



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Wilderness Act in Congress. He died in May 1964, just four months before the Wilderness Act became law.

These two men and their vision offer us a reminder of a lost moment in American politics. These days, environmental politics is rife with partisan debate that pits Democrats against Republicans in an unproductive stalemate. Witness the national debates over the future of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, logging on the national forests, and snowmobiles in Yellowstone National Park. Yet, when the Wilderness Act became law, it was a product of compromise and it enjoyed the support of Republicans and Democrats alike. In large part, this was because of the leadership of people like Saylor and Zahniser, who wished to protect a reasonable portion of the nation's public lands for future

generations, while leaving the rest open for development. Then, as today, that balanced approach to managing our national forests was a political winner for everyone.

The Wilderness Act created a new category of protection for our federal lands: wilderness areas. In designated wilderness areas hunting, fishing, and other forms of non-mechanized recreation are permitted, while logging, mining, and mechanized recreation are prohibited. The wilderness system has been a tremendous success nationwide. Today, 15 percent of our federal land across the country enjoys wilderness protection. Those wilderness areas draw tens of millions of visitors per year. More telling, economic research shows that in rural counties wilderness designations are an engine of economic growth. That makes good sense. Tourists like to vacation in areas where the

natural beauty and recreational opportunities are protected.

Now it is time to consider the future of wilderness on the Allegheny National Forest.

Here in Pennsylvania, only two percent of the national forest enjoys wilderness protection — Hickory Creek southwest of Warren and a string of islands in the Allegheny River. On a national forest measuring one-half million acres, however, there is ample room for both wilderness protection and resource management. Indeed, a balanced approach to managing the national forests promises to strengthen both the region's tourist economy and its natural resource industries. For that reason, one of the most important issues being considered in the current forest planning process is the future of wilderness on the Allegheny National Forest.

A group of local citizens has renewed Saylor's and Zahniser's moderate approach to conservation. Over the past three years, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, local recreationists, timber interests and public officials have undertaken discussions over the future of wilderness on the Allegheny National Forest.

A citizens' proposal, developed locally by Friends of Allegheny Wilderness volunteers, identifies

eight areas encompassing 54,460 acres of public land for potential wilderness protection on the Allegheny National Forest.

That marks a reasonable starting point for discussions about the future of the region's national forest.

The next step is to hammer out congressional legislation that will protect those lands for today and tomorrow.

These discussions, like the work of Saylor and Zahniser, offer us a reminder of the compromise essential to balanced conservation. It may be easy to oppose all wilderness designations — as does some local industry — or to oppose all logging on the national forests — as do some local environmentalists.

But such one-sided views do not reflect the public interest. Indeed, it is such extreme positions that have plunged environmental issues into a storm of debate at the national level. What is happening on the Allegheny National Forest shows us that there is a middle way.

With the support of the region's two congressmen, John Peterson and Phil English, there is the promise of a compromise that protects our region's natural heritage and its economy.

That is a tradition with deep roots in Western Pennsylvania.