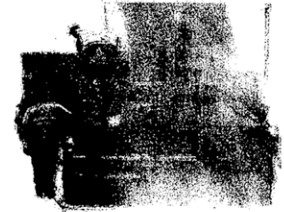


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## FAW raps buffer zone directive

By DEAN WELLS

*Times Observer Staff Writer*

A local conservation group says a misinterpretation of the Wilderness Act by the U.S. Forest Service is preventing new wilderness designations in the Allegheny National Forest.

While the Forest Service is considering the Chestnut Ridge, Minister Valley and Tracy Ridge areas for possible wilderness designation as it revises its Forest Plan, three areas — previously identified as roadless, but no longer — have been dropped for further consideration.

The Friends of Allegheny Wilderness blames the loss of roadless designation — the precursor of wilderness designation — on a di-

rective put in place by former Regional Forester Robert Jacobs in 1997.

Under the directive, a buffer zone of one-half mile must be put in place to separate roadless areas from improved roads, significant mineral activities, railroads, utility corridors, the Allegheny Reservoir, etc. According to the Forest Service's National Recreation Opportunity Spectrum protocols, areas of less than 2,500 acres cannot be considered for roadless designation.

Establishment of the buffer zones puts the Allegheny Front, Clarion River and Cornplanter areas in the ANF below the 2,500 acres

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minimum. As a result, the Forest Service is no longer considering the three areas for wilderness designation.

Kirk Johnson, director of FAW, objects to the buffer zone policy put in place by Jacobs. "There is nothing in the Wilderness Act that calls for a buffer," Johnson said. "It's not appropriate. The Wilderness Act and Congress didn't intend for that. It shouldn't be part of a roadless inventory."

According to Johnson, the Forest Service is also no longer considering the Hickory Creek Wilderness Addition, Morrison Run or the Tionesta areas for wilderness designation. FAW recommended that all three receive wilderness status.

As for not giving roadless designation to areas smaller than 2,500 acres, Johnson said there is already precedence approving smaller areas.

"One example is the Allegheny Wilderness Islands," he said. "They total 368 acres. It's one of the smallest areas to have wilderness designation."

In December, Johnson traveled to the Forest Service's Eastern Region office in Milwaukee to confer with Regional

Forester Randy Moore and ask him to overturn the directive from 1997 calling for buffer zones.

"He and his staff were very official, very friendly and attentive," Johnson said. "We had a constructive dialog."

Johnson followed up the visit with a letter to Moore, asking him to rescind the 1997 directive. Moore replied in a letter dated Jan. 24 and declined to overturn the directive. He wrote: "I have reviewed this guidance and determined that it provides consistency in the application of direction found in the Forest Service Handbook for the identification of roadless areas and subsequent wilderness evaluations...Therefore, I have chosen to leave the Aug. 19, 1997 guidance in force."

"What we're seeing," Johnson said, "is the (Forest Service) on a regional and local levels circling the wagons to protect this 1997 directive."

While having an area designated as roadless as a precursor for wilderness designation, Johnson said there is a way around it: "Congress could go past that and make it wilderness."