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# American Forests

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# American Forests

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— by Jane Braxton Little

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Cover: American and Jefferson elms  
form an arc along the drive to the north entrance to the White House  
Photo by Dan Smith



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## CONCERNS IN THE ALLEGHENY FOREST

Faced with new interest in natural-gas drilling, Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness is trying to secure federal protection for pristine areas in Allegheny National Forest. Staff and volunteers with the non-profit organization are lobbying federal lawmakers to protect eight tracts (a total of 54,000 acres) under the Wilderness Protection Act. They also hope to purchase mineral rights in key areas of the Allegheny Forest to prevent drilling in ecologically sensitive areas.

For the past three years, energy companies have focused on Pennsylvania, seeking to tap a vast underground reservoir of gas called the Marcellus Shale formation, the largest untapped reserve of natural gas in the country.



ALEXVALECO

*The Allegheny National Forest contains several areas threatened by natural gas drilling.*

Though the federal government owns 513,300 acres of forest land in northern Pennsylvania, it does not always own the mineral rights, said Kirk Johnson, executive director of Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness. Gas companies that own those mineral rights can drill on public land without seeking federal approval.

Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness has been researching the need to protect certain critical areas inside the forest since 2001. A federal designation as wilderness would keep the forest in a wild state, prohibiting logging, road building, and motorized recreation.

Currently, less than 2 percent of the Allegheny Forest is protected as wilderness, but the addition of these eight areas would bring that up to 12 percent, Johnson said, adding that this is in line with other national forests.

More importantly, it protects old-growth forests, pristine waterways, and excellent wildlife habitat. "It is the highest level of protection we can give to our natural lands," he said. "You can still go hiking, hunting, fishing, and backpacking, but you go in on your own two feet."

Johnson has been in contact with Pennsylvania's congressional delegation to gain support for the designation. So far, there's been an interest in pursuing federal designation, said Tina Kreisher, a spokeswoman for Rep. Glenn Thompson (R-PA), whose district includes the forest. However, environmental and natural-gas interests must both be met. "There must be a consensus between the industry and Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness to move forward," she said. "At this point, we are not seeing that."

Even if the Allegheny tracts gain federal protection, drilling could still occur. When the federal government purchased land for the forest in the 1920s, there was little acquisition of mineral rights, so the owners of those mineral rights can still come in and drill for oil and gas. That's why the Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness is seeking to buy the rights in these eight sensitive areas. Doing so, however, would cost several million dollars—more than the group could afford, Johnson said. So it is seeking grant money, and trying to partner with larger environmental organizations.

"We run on a shoestring budget, but we're trying to keep our campaign rolling. Our goal is to make the public aware that these areas urgently need protection."

—Darrin Youker



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