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► OPINION

Keep wilderness roadless

By **LEE L. SNYDER, Ph.D.**

Times Guest Columnist

Pennsylvania ("Penn's Woods") from colonial times has had beautiful forests and streams. To this day, spectacular landscapes and outdoor recreation areas, like Marsh Creek State Park, the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge, and the Allegheny National Forest, offer welcome retreats from urban life for all Pennsylvanians.

At the Allegheny's Hickory Creek and Allegheny Islands wilderness area people can hike among towering second-growth hardwoods and can paddle the wild and scenic Allegheny River among the wilderness islands. Thousands of undeveloped acres of roadless land in the Allegheny, however, do not yet have the same permanent protection of the wilderness areas. For many years the non-profit Warren-based Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (www.pawild.org) has worked with local stakeholders to craft a plan that protects the last remnants of wild Pennsylvania. With input from locals, the people who know the land best, substantial progress has been made for achieving the strongest possible protection for the undeveloped watersheds vital to the four-county Allegheny National Forest region.

It will be appropriate for more of our state to have this protection: A native, Howard Zahniser, who grew up in Forest County, drafted the bill introduced by state Rep. John Saylor of Johnstown which eventually became the Wilderness Act of 1964. This act gives permanent national protection to areas designated by Congress as wilderness.

The Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act (H.R.1581/S.1087) now threatens the protection of remaining roadless areas, possible candidates for wilderness designation. This unfortunate proposal that might well be called the "Great Outdoors Giveaway," would summarily withdraw important protection from already formally recognized roadless lands throughout the country.

Under this proposal spectacular roadless areas such as Tracy Ridge, Allegheny Front, Cornplanter, and the Clarion River area would become more vulnerable to the kind of development inconsistent with preservation of wilderness values. These are areas that former senators Hugh Scott and Richard Schweiker back in the 1970s sought to have designated as wilderness.

This proposal will "release" from possible wilderness protection millions

of areas across the country. These areas, popular with hunters, anglers, hikers, campers and birders, provide livelihoods in adjacent local economies. The outdoor industry contributes \$750 billions annually to the U.S. economy and supports 6.5 million jobs that depend on conservation of public lands where its customers use the products they make and sell.

Leaders of the outdoor recreational industry, heads of hunting and fishing organizations, business owners, local elected officials, and conservationists have made clear that the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act is a threat to the vitality and protection of such important recreational resources.

Lee L. Snyder, Philadelphia University professor emeritus, is a member of the Wilderness Society and of Friends of Allegheny Wilderness. His late wife, Helen, was the sister of Howard Zahniser, author of the Wilderness Act.