Shared-use decision withdrawn for Tracy Ridge

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Allegheny National Forest Supervisor Sherry Tune is withdrawing her decision to open Tracy Ridge to bikers.

In a press release Friday afternoon, the supervisor said the July 27 decision notice for shared use trails and an amendment to the forest plan was being withdrawn.

According to the press release, Tune said that other priorities on the forest have come to the forefront and have stretched forest resources.

“We are being asked to focus our efforts on timber volume and the number of acres treated as national priorities,” she said.

The Tracy Ridge Shared Use Trails Project proposed to convert a 12.5-mile section of the 34-mile trail system from hiking only to shared-use (open to bicycles and hikers).

“I understand the interest in revitalizing the Tracy Ridge Trail System and I greatly appreciate the offer from local mountain bike groups to assist the forest with the maintenance of this system,” the supervisor said. “At this time, I feel the best course of action for the forest is to place a pause on the project while we gather additional input and ideas from local user groups.”

The forest also faces threats in the form of insects and disease, she said, noting the importance of focusing staff time on emerging forest health issues. Tune said she plans to continue engaging local user groups on the maintenance needs and opportunities for shared use of the trail system, as well as how to move forward with the project in the future.

Tune’s decision to open Tracy Ridge to bikers had been opposed by environmental groups, including Friends of Allegheny Wilderness.

In December 2016, when Tune announced the environmental assessment and proposed action for Tracy Ridge, FAW’s Executive Director Kirk Johnson called it a “lump of coal” for Christmas.

On Friday, Johnson said, “This is the first we’ve heard of this decision. It sounds potentially like good news. I am cautiously optimistic that the Allegheny National Forest has made the right decision about Tracy Ridge, but will wait to hear more about the situation.”

One of the concerns voiced by the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness since the proposal was first introduced was a belief that Tracy Ridge should be designated a wilderness area.

Johnson reiterated on Friday, “The entire proposed Tracy Ridge Wilderness Area should of course be designated as wilderness under the Wilderness Act of 1964 — similar to what Allegheny National Forest itself proposed in the Preferred Alternative of their Draft Forest Plan in 2006.”

When the Forest Service was accepting comments on the proposal, many members of the public shared concerns about mountain bikers going where they weren’t supposed to be — trespassing on the North Country Trail — if allowed on the Tracy Ridge Trail.

The reasons given by the forest service for making the decision in the first place included creating better usage of the trail system, addressing maintenance needs on the trail and providing additional mountain biking opportunities.

The Tracy Ridge area is located approximately 15 miles west of Bradford. The area includes 34 miles of trail (including approximately 10 miles of the North Country National Scenic Trail) and a campground.