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NWF backs expansion of ANF wilderness areas

WARREN — The National Wildlife Federation is supporting the expansion of Congressionally designated wilderness on the Allegheny National Forest, on the heels of the passage of the federal Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009.

The national forest wilderness proposal of Friends of Allegheny Wilderness has the support of a rapidly growing, broad-based grassroots constituency that seeks protection for some of Pennsylvania's last parcels of remote, wild forestland.

The Friends of Allegheny Wilderness Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for the forest advocates adding eight areas and 54,460 acres to America's National Wilderness Preservation System, which was established with the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

"With passage of this important federal public land protection, it's now time to turn our attention in earnest to Pennsylvania's only national forest — the Allegheny," said Anthony Caligiuri, executive director of National Wildlife

Federation's Chesapeake Mid-Atlantic Regional Center in Annapolis, Md. "Beyond the protection that this designation would afford individual species, wilderness designations help improve ecological health across an entire landscape."

For his part, Nick Schroeck, regional representative with the federation, said "The ANF is a remarkable resource that deserves more protection. We look forward to working with FAW and our Ohio affiliate, the League of Ohio Sportsmen, to ensure that these ecologically valuable parcels retain their natural splendor for future generations while remaining open to non-mechanized hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation."

The Citizens' Wilderness Proposal was published in 2003 to coincide with the revision of the national forest's long-term management plan, or Forest Plan. Forest Plan revision lasted nearly four years, with the new plan being published by the Forest Service in March of 2007. Of the 8,200 public comments submitted on the draft Forest Plan in 2006,

more than 6,800 (better than 80 percent) specifically favored the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal.

Officials said there are only two wilderness areas totaling 9,000 acres in the Allegheny.

"While we certainly recognize the significance of continued timber production and other important uses of the Allegheny National Forest to the region's economy and way of life, it must also be acknowledged that there is an acute shortage of protected wilderness here," said Kirk Johnson, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness executive director.

Wilderness designated under the Wilderness Act consists of significant parcels of federal public land set aside to be left in their natural condition in perpetuity. Hunting, fishing, hiking, backpacking, cross-country skiing, and other forms of non-mechanized recreation are permitted within federal wilderness areas. New roads, motorized recreation, permanent developments, logging and other forms of commercial extraction are not permitted.