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Opinion / Commentary

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Our opinion: Merit in wilderness

There's considerable merit in a proposal being advanced by the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness to include additional wilderness areas in the next version of the Allegheny National Forest's management plan.

Currently there are two designated wilderness areas on the Allegheny, the Hickory Creek Wilderness and the Allegheny Islands Wilderness. Together, these two areas total about 9,000 acres, less than two percent of the total national forest.

Even by the standards of other eastern national forests, where wilderness areas average in the neighborhood of 10 percent of the total forest, the amount of protected land on the Allegheny is miserly.

Friends of Allegheny Wilderness would like to increase the amount of protected land on the Allegheny to somewhere near the standard of other national forests in the East. To accomplish that, the group proposes studying a number of areas for possible wilderness designation, including the Tionesta Scenic Area, the Allegheny Front and Tracy Ridge recreational areas, and some roadless areas along the Clarion River.

That study deserves public support for several reasons.

In terms of significance, the Tionesta Scenic Area is the largest tract of old growth forest between the Adirondacks and the Smokey Mountains and one of the finest remaining examples of the original Eastern forest. As such, it deserves

protection.

In terms of politics, the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness represents a reasonable alternative to the all-or-nothing tactics of Allegheny Defense Project, which seeks to ban logging and other resource use on the entire forest.

In terms of economics, the proposed wilderness areas would have minimal impact on the timber industry but could have a significant economic benefit in terms of forest visitor use, providing far more opportunity for the type of dispersed forest recreation which has generated considerable income for the local areas around many other national forests in the East.

The idea clearly merits further study.