

Allegheny Wild!

A Citizen's Vision for the Allegheny National Forest

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Allegheny National Forest is located in northwestern Pennsylvania and consists of 513,257 acres within the counties of Warren, McKean, Elk and Forest. The Allegheny was designated by President Calvin Coolidge in 1923 under the authority of the Weeks Law which gave presidents authority to designate national forests for watershed protection *or* timber production. President Coolidge specifically designated the Allegheny for watershed protection, not timber production. This is an important factor to remember considering that today, the Allegheny National Forest is one of the most heavily timbered and drilled national forests in the eastern region and indeed the country.

Over 90% of the Allegheny is open to logging and approximately 93% of the mineral rights are owned by private individuals and oil and gas companies. As the Forest Service heads into the 15-year revision of its forestwide management plan, the opportunity exists to realign the management of the Allegheny National Forest to more closely reflect both its original mission of watershed protection and the large majority of public support for non-industrial management of National Forest lands, as shown in several national polls. Allegheny Wild! offers a positive vision and a comprehensive alternative to the current extraction-heavy management policies.

The Allegheny National Forest is within a day's drive of one-third of the United States population. With the increase in urban populations and sprawl, more people are turning to our national forests for recreation, whether it be camping, hiking, hunting, fishing or cross-country skiing. Situated between major population centers such as Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Buffalo the Allegheny provides an important destination for many.

Owing to its unique physiographic location and substantial acreage, the Allegheny provides the foremost public opportunity in Pennsylvania for the protection of wildlife

habitats critical to the survival of many species including state and federally listed rare, sensitive, threatened and endangered species. It is against this backdrop – uniqueness of stature in relation to federal and state laws, importance as a destination for millions of Americans seeking quality recreational experiences, and its original, fundamental mandate of watershed protection – that the management of the Allegheny must be measured.

Management Planning Issues

With over 90% of the Allegheny available for logging and oil & gas drilling, many other facets of forest management have been ignored or severely underrepresented. The Allegheny has a low percentage of its land base in special management areas including Wilderness, National Recreation Areas, Scenic Areas and Natural Areas when compared to other national forests. The 1986 Forest Plan discourages non-extractive forest uses by zoning a majority of the land to Management Areas that are incompatible with many recreational or wildlife habitat qualities. Even Management Areas that are zoned primarily for watershed and recreational values allow resource extraction to occur creating additional user conflicts.

This policy has resulted in a road network that exceeds 4,000 miles. For comparison, the White Mountain National Forest in New Hampshire has only 250 miles of roads in the entire national forest despite being nearly 300,000 acres larger than the Allegheny. Certain areas of the Allegheny have road densities comparable to the city of Warren, PA. This dense road network has fragmented much of the available habitat while also presenting a financial burden to taxpayers for construction and maintenance costs.

Oil and gas development leads to the degradation of forest habitats through the construction of roads, pipelines, well sites and storage tanks. The even-aged logging practiced in vast areas leads to forests of uniform age composed of a few commercially valuable tree species, most notably black cherry. These two factors have led to a national forest that is predominantly characterized by an unnatural forest type promoted solely for timber production that is heavily impacted, visually and environmentally, by industrialized oil and gas developments.

Numerous other management issues receive far less attention as a result of current Forest Service promotion of industrial resource extraction. The Forest Service has yet to produce one legally required management plan for the recovery of State threatened and endangered species. To avoid complicating the timber sale program, the Forest Service has ignored its own old-growth corridor plan that would have provided thousands of acres of contiguous, mature forest habitats for species dependent upon such large, unbroken tracts.

Only 2% of the Allegheny is designated Wilderness. This is far below the percentage of National Forest lands, nationally and regionally. There are numerous opportunities for Wilderness designation including the lands surrounding and including the Tionesta Scenic and Research Natural Areas, the Minister Creek Valley, the Clarion River Roadless Area, the Sugar Run area, the Chappel Fork area within the scenic by-way and expansion of the Hickory Creek Wilderness. There are also opportunities to increase other special areas including Tionesta, Lamentation Run and Bear Creek National Recreation Areas as well as numerous other recreation, scenic, historic and research natural areas.

Scientific Issues

There have been numerous additions to our scientific knowledge base since the last land and resource management plan was adopted in 1986. Today, issues such as biodiversity, habitat requirements and species viability, air pollution, and ecosystem services are much better understood than they were in 1986 and management direction should be updated to reflect these changes.

Today we understand that the even-aged management regime currently in use contributes to reduced vegetative diversity, increased soil acidity from base cation loss, increased susceptibility to air pollution, and excessive deer populations. These factors result from voluntary discretion by the Forest Service in the pursuit of producing black cherry. Consider the fact that black cherry has been artificially increased from less than 1% of the forest canopy in pre-settlement forests to nearly 30% today with some understories consisting of greater than 50% black cherry. The forest structure that results from widespread even-aged management for black cherry is a simplified one. Ecology is

removed from the equation of forest management in exchange for emphasizing commercial timber species. There is a deficit of old-growth trees, mid-story trees and forest floor woody debris; excessive light penetrates the forest canopy leading to a decrease in native herbaceous vegetation due to increased fern cover. These problems are largely attributable to forestwide even-aged logging.

Air pollution received little mention in the 1986 plan. Today, however, we know that the Allegheny Plateau is subject to the worst air pollution in the nation from the Ohio Valley. Kane has been measured as the third most acidic site in North America. This deposition leaches essential elements from the soils depriving vegetation of necessary nutrition while increasing acidity. The Forest Service currently has no comprehensive plan to address the increasing impacts associated with acidic deposition or other air pollution concerns, simply saying they are outside the agency's scope.

Numerous other issues, including the major disruptions caused by alien/invasive species, the need to protect wildlife habitat from fragmentation, the conservation of soils and watersheds are much better understood today. Consequently, the approach to their management should incorporate these new findings.

Socio-Economic Issues

There are many socio-economic factors that must be taken into consideration. Recreation, ecosystem services, quality of life and local communities are critical to understanding the nature of national forest regions and how best to meet the needs of the people living there while also meeting the needs of the non-local public who benefit from services the forest provides.

The potential for low-impact recreation has been overlooked with little acreage devoted to recreation in the Allegheny. The areas that are emphasized for recreation are focused around the Allegheny Reservoir in the northern part of the forest, while the southern part hosts only three campgrounds. Little attention is given to the impact of poorly maintained ORV trails while the Forest Service continues to promote the expansion of their use. Interestingly, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, in charge of managing the 2.1 million acres of Pennsylvania's State Forests, has declared that no additional ORV trails will be constructed on State Forest land citing

adequate interest in the private sector to construct and maintain trails. The Forest Service should do the same considering the Allegheny is four times smaller than the State Forest system.

The Forest Service has caused management conflicts by logging along scenic hiking trails and permitting oil and gas wells to be drilled in areas of high recreational value without objection. Allegheny Wild! would designate over 200 miles of quality hiking, bicycle, cross-country ski and horse trails. Also 5 new Wilderness Areas, 3 new National Recreation Areas, and numerous other recreation, scenic, historic and research natural areas would be designated to bring the Allegheny more in line with other national forests. This would provide critical wildlife habitat for threatened and endangered species, jobs focused on both highlighting the natural beauty of the Allegheny and restoration activities in areas heavily impacted by resource extraction, invasive species and air pollution.

Our national forests are important reservoirs of biological capital that is only beginning to be understood. The Forest Service consistently ignores the value of ecosystem services when developing projects, presenting the public with an incomplete picture in terms of determining the actual costs and benefits of the project's implementation. Values such as clean air, clean water, erosion and sedimentation prevention, essential element retention and recreational opportunities are all quantifiable parameters that can be calculated to assess the benefits of un-logged forests. One example of this is clean water. Every year, our national forests provide 530.4 million acre-feet of clean water valued at \$3.7 billion. On the other hand, logging our national forests costs taxpayers an average of \$2 billion every year.

For many who live in the Allegheny National Forest there is concern about quality of life and how management decisions affect local economies. Historically, counties within national forests have received 25% of the revenue derived from timber sales. The guaranteed payment option, which only Forest County is currently using to its benefit, is a means for providing revenues while preserving forests. By providing a replacement for historic logging-linked revenues, guaranteed payments give the local residents a needed cushion while they take the opportunity to diversify their economies.

Conclusion

With today's understanding of the importance of protecting public forest land for conservation purposes, our vision of the Allegheny National Forest is one that ends the longstanding abuses of commercial logging practices and oil and gas extraction that have created an un-natural, fragmented forest. The Allegheny has enormous potential to provide quality Wilderness and other recreational experiences that will align it more with other eastern national forests.

The Allegheny National Forest was specifically designated for watershed protection, not timber production. This fact underscores the necessity of conserving the Allegheny National Forest for uses other than commodity extraction. The Allegheny represents only 3% of Pennsylvania's forest land but carries a disproportionate burden of providing critical wildlife habitat for threatened and endangered species, as well as quality, low-impact recreational experiences for people. It is through this lens that the uniqueness of the Allegheny National Forest must be viewed and the full value of its potential realized.