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OIL AND GAS/FORESTS: Enviro group seeks halt to drilling in Allegheny National Forest (Thursday, May 29, 2008)

Katie Howell, *Land Letter* reporter

Oil and gas drilling in Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest does not follow the same regulations that govern other Forest Service lands throughout the country, a local environmental group contends. And yet, the Allegheny National Forest has more oil and gas wells -- more than 10,000 -- than any of the other 154 national forests combined, according to the Allegheny Defense Project.

Allegheny National Forest determined that oil and gas drilling within the forest on land with privately held mineral rights -- which accounts for about 95 percent of the forest -- was not subject to federal standards under the National Environmental Policy Act, which requires environmental reviews and a public comment period before drilling can occur on public land. But the Allegheny Defense Project claims Allegheny National Forest violated federal law by not requiring NEPA analysis.

The Allegheny Defense Project yesterday sent a letter to Forest Service officials detailing specific cases in which oil and gas drilling on Forest Service lands with privately held mineral rights in Arkansas, Michigan and West Virginia were subject to NEPA regulations. The letter calls for the Forest Service to stop all oil and gas drilling activities in the Allegheny forest until similar environmental assessments can be performed.

"For years, the Forest Service in Allegheny said [NEPA] regulations ... didn't apply to private oil and gas drilling," said Ryan Talbott, Forest Watch coordinator for the Allegheny Defense Project. "But they can't have all the other national forests doing NEPA analysis and this one, lone national forest not doing it."

Yesterday's letter is the second in a week challenging the Forest Service's management of oil and gas drilling in Allegheny National Forest. Allegheny Defense Fund sent a similar letter last Thursday calling for a halt in drilling activity until environmental analysis has taken place. The conservation group was also one of about 80 groups opposing the Allegheny National Forest's management plan issued in February after the Forest Service required the forest to lay out specifics for managing drilling.

"We made this same comment back in February," Talbott said. "Now we have the documentation to back ourselves up."

The Allegheny Defense Project's letters detail cases in which oil and gas development on land with privately owned mineral rights in Ottawa and Huron-Manistee national forests in Michigan

with privately owned mineral rights in Utah and Harsh managed national forests in Montana, West Virginia's Monongahela National Forest and the Ouachita National Forest in Arkansas underwent NEPA analysis before drilling or road building began.

"This double standard evinces a knowing and repeated betrayal by the Forest Service to carry out its mandatory legal obligations to protect the surface resources of the Allegheny National Forest," Talbott wrote in yesterday's letter to Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell, U.S. Forest Service regional forester Kent Connaughton and Allegheny National Forest Supervisor Leanne Marten.

But Allegheny National Forest does perform environmental evaluation before drilling, according to the Forest Service.

"We are doing environmental analysis of some kind, but there are different levels of analysis and project-by-project evaluations," said Jane Cliff, a regional spokeswoman for the Forest Service. "There's no one-size-fits-all plan. It's very site specific and project specific."

But Talbott disagreed, saying, "That's a load of garbage. They don't do environmental analyses. They've never done one."

The Allegheny National Forest official who handles oil and gas drilling could not be reached for comment before *Land Letter's* publication.

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