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## Thompson meets with forester on oil, gas drilling

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Flexing the muscles of his congressional office, U.S. Rep. Glenn Thompson, R-Pa., met Monday evening with the regional forester in charge of the Allegheny National Forest to discuss why drilling on the forest has stalled.

On Jan. 16, Eastern Regional Forester Kent Connaughton informed forest leadership that the region's headquarters in Milwaukee, Wis., would be taking over the responsibility of approving oil and gas developments on the forest due to four separate lawsuits, in which the Forest Service is the defendant.

Before a producer can start developing on the forest, U.S. Forest Service personnel must give a Notice to Proceed. Previously, reviewing the applications was under the authority of the ANF, but now the Eastern Region Headquarters has taken over the responsibility.

Since Jan. 16, the Milwaukee office has not approved a single application, leaving oil producers furious.

They argue the Forest Service is illegally denying them access to their mineral rights. More than 90 percent of the forest's subsurface is owned privately.

Thompson said that more than 30 separate oil com-  
(See THOMPSON, Page 8)

## Thompson

panies have contacted his office, feeling that their operations have been taken hostage, killing the revenue that new wells create.

Thompson met with Connaughton in Washington Tuesday to discuss the situation.

"Every day that development gets held up on the Allegheny is one day too long," Thompson said.

Though Thompson said Connaughton could not get into specifics regarding a timeline for Notices to Proceed to be issued, the regional forester is committed to facilitating as much permitting as he can.

Connaughton told the congressman that the delay is the result of Department of Justice attorneys that are looking over each application to see how it relates to current and possibly future lawsuits.

"They are looking at ways that they can get a good solid direction that allows them to take action on permits they have in hand that doesn't expose them in the future," Thompson said.

Under the Minard Run decision, a court decision in the

1970s related to oil and gas development on the forest, the Forest Service typically has 60 days to respond to applications for development, but that standard is in jeopardy with the transfer of approval to the region's headquarters.

Thompson explained to Connaughton that this hold up of permit approval is economically disastrous for the region.

According to a Pittsburgh Post-Gazette article, one producer on the forest estimated

that if drilling were stopped for an entire year on the forest, there would be a loss of \$100 million in income on the forest.

Though Thompson may have just made his presence felt if nothing else, the congressman vowed to keep working with the Forest Service to resolve the issue.

"The next step is going to be reaching out within different aspects of the Forest Service," Thompson said of his future plans to seek solutions.