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## Management shift follows Allegheny drilling debate

**The regional office in Milwaukee takes over review of applications for access to oil and gas reserves.**

WARREN — The U.S. Forest Service's regional office in Milwaukee has taken over review of applications for access to oil and gas reserves under Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest, a job that had been done by local staff.

The change was made because the forest is the subject of several lawsuits concerning forest management and oil and gas drilling, spokeswoman Kathy Mohney said Monday. She would not comment further on why the regional office assumed control.

The change went into effect Jan. 1.

High demand and prices for oil and gas have spurred drilling in Pennsylvania's only national forest, 800 square miles that lie in Elk, Forest, McKean and Warren counties. More than 2,000 wells were drilled in the past two years, and more than 9,000 wells operate in the forest.

Though the Forest Service owns the land surface, more than 90 percent of the mineral rights underneath are privately held. The Forest Service will also conduct an environmental impact study of forest drilling.

Ryan Talbott, forest watch coordinator for the Allegheny Defense Project, said the change was overdue.

"Now, after years of allowing oil and gas companies to run rampant across Pennsylvania's only national forest without stipulations to protect surface and water resources, the Forest Service is finally attempting to comply with the law," he said.

The Allegheny Defense Project is a plaintiff in one of the lawsuits, which contends the Forest Service's approval of several drilling projects would harm wildlife and the environment.

Other lawsuits contend the Forest Service does not have the right to regulate drillers.

Steve Rhodes, president of the Pennsylvania Oil and Gas Association — a plaintiff in one of those suits — said the change appears to be an attempt by the Forest Service to take more control over drilling.

He could not say what effect the new procedure would have on the drilling process.

"If it's an attempt to stop drilling, that confrontational stance could cause some problems. It might force the operators to move ahead on their own without waiting for the Forest Service," he said.

Karen Atwood, secretary of the Tionesta Valley Snowmobile Club, is also pleased with the recent developments.

“At long last, the public may begin to see the Forest Service take full responsibility to care for the land and serve the people™ they claim in their famous motto,” Atwood said. “Perhaps now we can expect protection for the recreation assets people come to the Allegheny to enjoy. It has been a long time coming.”

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