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Group seeking wilderness status for 'Chestnut Ridge', By JON SITLER, Times Observer Staff Writer

A conservation group has pinpointed an area it would like to promote as being designated a federal wilderness area within the Allegheny National Forest - 5,000 acres in McKean County the group is calling "Chestnut Ridge."

Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (FAW), founded last June by a former member of the Allegheny Defense Project (ADP), is advocating a significantly scaled-back version of the ADP's no-cut goal for public lands. FAW's proposal would set aside close to ten percent of the ANF as wilderness area that would be untouchable by loggers and drillers.

Ultimately, according to Kirk Johnson, FAW executive director, the new conservation group would like to see at least 50,000 acres of the ANF's 513,000 acres be designated wilderness areas. Johnson said less than two percent of the ANF's acreage is designated wilderness, compared to 18 percent nationwide on national forests and ten percent in the east.

Currently two wilderness areas - Hickory Creek and Allegheny Islands - total 9,000 acres of wilderness-designated land on the ANF. "A number of wild areas still exist here and could easily make the transition to wilderness without upheaval to the local timber or oil and gas industries," Johnson wrote in a recent letter to the editor in the Erie Times News. One is 5,000 acres FAW is calling "Chestnut Ridge," an area in which Johnson said he's found perhaps hundreds of rare American chestnut trees, most young and not yet struck by blight.

"We are delighted to know of so many American chestnuts in this important wild area of the Allegheny National Forest," Johnson said. "In light of this discovery, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness is referring to this area as Chestnut Ridge, and we believe the tract should be permanently protected as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. Chestnut Ridge certainly deserves such status anyway but we also see wilderness designation as a way to help promote the eventual reestablishment of the American chestnut as an important forest tree on the Allegheny Plateau."

Johnson said this area, adjacent to the Tracy Ridge National Recreation Area, stood out because of its roadless quality. He also said there is no active timbering or oil and gas operations in the area. Chestnut Ridge is 5,000 acres bounded roughly on the west by State Route 321, on the north by State Route 346, on the east by Forest Road 137 and on the south by Forest Road 271.

Johnson said the area is currently in Management Area 6.1 of the Allegheny National Forest, which mandates the "forest area (is) managed primarily for semi-primitive motorized dispersed recreation opportunities and wildlife species such as turkey, bear, cavity-nesting birds and mammals. Most roads (are) closed except for seasonal openings."

He said Chestnut Ridge is "largely roadless and uncut with an impressive forest cover of hemlock and black birch in the lowlands along the North Branch Sugar Run. Red, white and chestnut oak with red and sugar maple, yellow and black birch on the high plateau. Much of the area lies above 2,000 feet in elevation. During the late 1970's, there was a program of 'preroading' areas of the ANF that had lower product value in anticipation of logging the areas later when the trees matured. There were plans to build several roads into Chestnut Ridge under the preroading program, (but) since the timber was generally small in diameter and there was little of the Allegheny hardwood forest type, particularly black cherry, (then) Supervisor John Butt decided not to pursue preroading for the Chestnut Ridge area. There is also less oil and gas beneath Chestnut Ridge than in other parts of the forest."

A federal wilderness designation would take an act of legislation, and that's why the group is currently lobbying Congressman John Peterson. Johnson said Wednesday that Peterson seems "interested in listening to this," though he also must consider the views of timber and drilling industries.

Earlier this year, Peterson said, "ADP has never been willing to work with anybody. They're against everything. I've never seen anything from ADP that was reasonable. We're willing to work with (Friends of Allegheny Wilderness). We're going to explore and see if we can find some common ground."

Peterson is formulating a committee that will include representatives from all sides, according to his press secretary Paul Feenstra. Johnson said he also wants to meet with Congressman Phil English, whose new district will include parts of the forest.

"It's really an appropriate time to work on this issue," Johnson said. He said the Forest Service is entering into the revision process on the Forest Plan, which can be a four- to five-year process. "At the same time we don't necessarily have to wait until the end of that process (if a federal bill is passed)."

Johnson said hiking, backpacking, hunting and fishing are allowed in a wilderness area. There are no vehicles like ATVs or trucks or any type of tree cutting, even for firewood, allowed.

While that may rub loggers the wrong way a little bit, Johnson said, "we're definitely not a zero cut organization." He said the group is only seeking a few "appropriate" areas of the forest for wilderness designations and "it wouldn't include private land." Johnson said a wilderness area provides "habitat protection for nature, a scientific reference area for foresters to study" and "primitive recreation for people."

However, Johnson said it has been historically difficult to get the designation on the ANF, the last time being the through the 1984 Pennsylvania Wilderness Act that designated Hickory Creek and Allegheny Islands.

"While there is little known natural variation for blight resistance in the native chestnut population, preserving the land as undisturbed forest is the best thing you can do to keep the genetic diversity of the chestnut alive in the area," said Timothy McKechnie, operations coordinator of the Pennsylvania chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation. "There are probably over 30 million American chestnut sprouts in Pennsylvania alone. They are found pretty much everywhere that the land hasn't been plowed or timbered often."

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