

# ***Allegheny Forest Alliance***

## ***Spring 2008 Newsletter***

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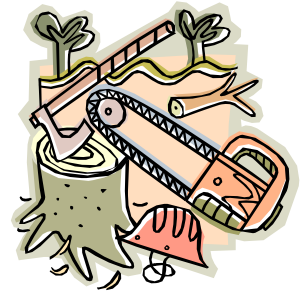
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## **FOREST PLAN UPHOLD**

Following a two month delay, the reviewing officer issued his decision regarding the Record of Decision (ROD) for the ANF Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) on February 15. The plan is set to drive forest decisions on the Allegheny for the next 10-20 years. Seventy-eight plan appeals were submitted under the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) and in short, the reviewing officer affirmed the decision to select Alternative “C modified” with two exceptions.

Joel Holtrop, an assistant chief and reviewing officer in the DC headquarters, found that the public was not provided an opportunity to comment on the substantial changes made in the “design criteria” used to regulate private oil and gas development as it relates to surface disturbance. As a result, he instructed the planning authority to incorporate language in the plan to clarify the Forest Service’s authority to manage oil and gas activities on the forest floor. Inherent in that decision is the need to:



- identify the roles and responsibilities of the Forest Service, the Commonwealth and private operators for the purpose of protecting surface resources.
- distinguish between reserved and outstanding ownership rights and how each varies with regard to mineral estate management.
- review and clarify the negotiation process regarding oil and gas activities between the Forest Service and the operators.

The second area of concern cited in the decision was meeting air quality standards, again as they relate to oil and gas development. Mr. Holtrop reasoned that air quality on a local as well as a regional level may not comply with NEPA regulations as outlined in the current CFR and instructed planners to more fully document the cumulative effects of O&G activity on air quality.

All other concerns, procedural and substantive brought forth in the many appeals were considered by the reviewer to be without merit. As a result, the plan was affirmed and is now in effect with the two exceptions. Taking the Forest Service to court would be the only means available to potentially derail the decision from moving forward.

## COUNTIES AND SCHOOLS COALITION MEETS

The executive committee of the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition (NFCSC) met recently in Reno, Nevada. The primary focus of the meeting continues to be the same one that has driven the coalition for the last nine years, namely safety-net legislation to compensate for plummeting 25% forest payments. You will recall NFCSC ran point for the authorization of **PL106-393** (*Secure Rural Schools and Communities Act*) that provided six years of compensation for rapidly declining traditional payments.

All reports at the conference indicate there is a strong chance for reauthorization at least for one more year. The House effort is being led by Representatives DeFazio and Hooley. They have organized a strong campaign to encourage Chairman Obey of the Appropriations Committee to include a one year reauthorization at the current level of funding in the emergency supplemental package. The effort is increasing in momentum and I certainly would encourage constituents to write their congressman seeking support of this effort.

On the Senate side, the issue is being promoted by Senators Reid, Wyden, Baucus, Bingaman and others. On the plus side, the Senate version is a four year package instead of just one year. On the minus side, the package includes many of same provisions found in last year's failed attempt. They include the 10% ramp-down in basic funding, ties to national forest acreage per county as well as per capita income per county, and entanglement with PILT (Payment In Lieu of Taxes) funding. All these additional criteria work to drastically reduce payment to PA townships and schools.

The outlook appears good for both bills moving forward by May and conference committee work to be done before the summer break (end of June). The big question will be which version will emerge. If the House version makes it, you can breathe a sigh of relief for 2009 only, but it will be at the current level of funding. If the Senate version prevails, there is likely to be a drastic reduction in the distributed amount to the Commonwealth.

One other hotly debated issue swirling around the Senate chamber is how to handle the eight states that are significantly hammered by the ramp down. A select group of western senators have proposed holding three states (CA, OR and WA) harmless the first year of the ramp-down. Five states including PA are not included in the proposal and at great expense. Coalition executive director Bob Douglas estimates the inclusion of the other five states would only cost \$18M and has lobbied hard for parity. What is lost in the argument, however, is the fact that of the five states left out, PA would lose as much money as the other four combined. Indeed, the Senate version as currently written would be a total disaster for PA. I would encourage all constituents to write our senators regarding this gross injustice.

With all that is going on with this year's election, I realize it is difficult to consider much else. But, I would earnestly encourage you to track the reauthorization effort in Congress and measure the proposed effects on our region.

## GETTING THE FACTS STRAIGHT

On more than one occasion recently, articles have appeared in various regional newspapers selling the notion that more wilderness will generate a local economic windfall; that locking up the land for primitive, non-motorized recreation only is somehow going to attract countless numbers of tourists. It is time to get the facts straight.

By its very definition, wilderness stresses the absence of humans. Webster's Dictionary defines wilderness as an "uncultivated, uninhabited region," neither of which applies to this region nor most of Eastern United States. It is difficult at best to assert by increasing wilderness there is going to be a corresponding increase in humans, visitors or otherwise. In fact, the current *Land and Resource Management Plan* for the ANF states that wilderness preservation may even require restricted visitation in order to preserve desired characteristics. Indeed, more wilderness is in no way synonymous with more people. A study appearing recently in the *Proceedings of the National Academy* further supports that fact.



Oliver Pergams, a biology instructor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has been collecting outdoor head counts from national, state and local parks, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and commercial polling firms for several years. The data shows a clear downward trend in nature-based activities. In fact, since the late 1980s, the percentage of Americans taking part in such activities has declined by over 1 percent each year. Pergam's study shows that participation is down 18 to 25 percent from peak levels two decades ago.

Mark Barrow, a Virginia Tech environmental historian, calls it an "era of mediated nature" in which people "...seem to not need to experience the natural world in the ways that we did previously." He suggests they simply go to the zoo or visit sites electronically.

On the local front empirical data regarding the effects of the "PA Wilds!" initiative confirms Pergam's conclusion. Local merchants and innkeepers have experienced little increase in traffic as a result of the 14 county promotion. A "wild" experience has not attracted hordes of visitors or tons of revenue.

On the other hand, let's consider a recent study done at Penn State University that reports the oil and gas industry is pumping millions of dollars into the local, four county region annually while creating three-quarters of a million dollars in additional taxes. The findings released in January indicate that for 100 jobs directly related to the industry, an additional 63 are created in related services. When combined these jobs provide \$7.9M in annual compensation. Even the most fervent wilderness advocate cannot seriously suggest these numbers can be realistically off-set by devoting the landscape to wilderness endeavors.

Fact is, the survival of our local culture, customs, and economy depend on maximizing the use of land and resources immediately available. Locking up the land in a wilderness state will not serve that end whatsoever.

## BUZZWORD OF NOTE

A very popular term emerging in many county plans recently is “geotourism.” It was spawned by National Geographic and is defined as “*tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place – its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents.*” In fact, an actual charter has been developed that can be endorsed by agencies at any level interested in promoting the concept.

The reference to maintaining the “geographical character” of the place as well as its “culture” and “heritage” is of particular importance for planning consideration. When applied to the region in and around the ANF, two factors leap out as fundamental to any such consideration, namely timber harvesting and oil and gas production. Both are steeped in historical significance and are integral to the culture and heritage of the region and therefore should provide a platform for tourism.

Rather than apologize for harvesting trees and hiding the visual effects for instance, agency representatives should educate tourists regarding the purposes it serves. Tourists should learn in part about the renewable nature of wood, the vital role played by early successional habitats, and the effects of a healthy versus an unhealthy forest. Likewise they should learn about the historical beginning of the oil and gas industry, advances in applied technology, how production affects their lives and the lives of local residents. In short, we need to be proud of our natural resource heritage and share it with all those who choose to visit this region.

Geotourism is a worthy objective for county planning, but it needs to be done within the geographic and cultural parameters of the region. It must not be made to conform to someone else’s vision or desire for the region. Doing so would be deceitful and would dishonor our heritage.



## REVERSAL IN TIME

In 1905 the *Transfer Act* was passed removing federal land reserves from management by the Department of Interior and placing them under the direction of the Department of Agriculture. The rationale was quite simple and straight forward. The reserves were to be managed to provide wood, water and forage. It made little sense having the Department of Interior manage the reserves when its mission is to preserve rather than produce.

Upon assuming control these lands, then Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson said on February 1, 1905, “*In the administration of the forest reserves it must be clearly borne in mind that all land is to be devoted to the most productive use for the permanent good of the whole people....*” The intent of the transfer was quite clear. The reserves were to be managed for the benefit of the people, starting first with local residents as Secretary Wilson further asserted.

How times have changed. A recent article in a **Washington Post** disclosed that current leadership in the Appropriations Committee of the Senate is considering the return of the USFS to the Department of Interior. The reason cited for the switch was the “evolution” of our forests away from production to

preservation. You need not be a Rhodes Scholar to determine the origin of that evolution. A plethora of federal legislation has made production on our national forests virtually impossible. In other words, the switch was preordained over the last four decades by crippling legislation.

Don Kettl, director of the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania assesses the move as problematic. He states that it sends a symbolic message that national forests are to be preserved and enjoyed, not harvested and developed, thereby becoming a direct threat to the timber industry. No kidding!

I have argued for years the preservationist movement is all about such a change and the USFS has fallen victim to this hideous plot. I firmly believe the recent USFS administrations would eagerly embrace the change from their current mission, *“to sustain the health, diversity, and **productivity** of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations,”* with that of the Department of Interior, which is, *“to **preserve** the scenery, the natural and historic objects, and the wildlife of the United States, and leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”* (Emphasis added)

If indeed that evolution is substantiated by a departmental slight of hand, you can be sure the timber industry will be seriously impacted, particularly in regions of high concentration of national forest lands. It is vitally important for the sustainable health of the forest as well as economic and social health of the region such a maneuver never takes place.

## **AFA BOARD MEETING TO BE HELD**

The Board of Directors for the Allegheny Forest Alliance will hold their spring meeting on **Tuesday, May 13, at the Olmsted Manor in Ludlow**. The noon meeting will include a light lunch followed by a general business meeting. Agenda highlights include a status report on the reauthorization of Secure Rural Schools legislation along with a review of the NFCSC meeting in Reno, an update on the forest plan, Executive Committee appointments, and other issues. All Board members are encouraged to attend.

Your membership contribution for 2008 is due. Payment ensures you are represented in advocating for multiple-use management and a sustained yield on the Allegheny National Forest. Thank you.

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