

Educational Corner

Proposed Wilderness Designations

The Environmental Law and Policy Center is requesting Congressional action to designate three new Wilderness Areas and one addition to an existing area in the Ottawa National Forest. The new areas are the Ehlco area, the Trap Hills, the Norwich Plains and an addition to the Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness Area.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established the National Preservation System. The goal of the Act is to “secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.” The Act’s purpose is to preserve and protect the natural ecosystems and wild areas and also provide opportunities for solitude and retrospective or primitive recreation. There are currently 16 existing Federal Wilderness areas in Michigan and 803 wilderness areas in the United States totaling more than 110 million acres.

The three new proposed areas would create approximately 50,000 acres of designated property adjacent to the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park. The Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness addition would add approximately 2,000 acres to the current 17,000 acres. In order for these areas to be eligible for designation they must currently possess primitive qualities. The US Forest Service manages the proposed areas under the current Ottawa National Forest Plan.

What does it mean to be designated as a forest wilderness area? Wilderness is considered “an area where the earth and its community of life are untamed by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Allowed activities in Wilderness areas include backpacking, camping, hunting, fishing, horseback riding and other non-motorized recreational activities. No commercial enterprises, timber harvesting, mineral extraction, roads, structures, use of motor vehicles, or mountain biking are allowed. The Forest Service may prescribe measures necessary to control fire, insects and disease and protect health and safety of persons. The Forest service may also require permits for any allowed use. The prohibition of mineral extraction is not as clear as it appears in the Act. Many mineral acres are severed in the area of the Ottawa Forest and the mineral rights are dominate over other property rights; therefore, in the areas of severed minerals extraction would be allowed even if the Wilderness designation was approved.

Congressional action is required to designate a new Wilderness area. At this time, legislative action has not been initiated by Congress and the Forest Service has not been requested to comment on this proposal.

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