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**Forest Service Agrees to Conduct Environmental Review of Oil and Gas
Drilling in Allegheny Conservation Groups Hail Agreement**

ERIE, PA (4/9/09) - The U.S. Forest Service has agreed to conduct environmental review and allow the public to weigh in on all oil and gas development in the Allegheny National Forest, following pressure from conservation groups concerned that drilling will pollute water and destroy habitat for wildlife like the northern flying squirrel, eastern box turtle, northern goshawk, and timber rattlesnake.

The Forest Service reached a settlement today with Allegheny Defense Project, Sierra Club, and Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, who filed suit in November after the agency failed to subject 34 proposed oil and gas projects to adequate review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Today's agreement ensures the public's right to weigh in on all future drilling in the forest before the Forest Service gives it a green light.

The settlement will ensure that citizens have the opportunity to weigh in on drilling projects in the Allegheny National Forest. Over the past 10 years, thousands of oil and gas wells have been drilled in the Allegheny without environmental analysis and public comments. As a result of drilling, more than 2,000 miles of roads have been built, damaging important wildlife habitat.

"With this settlement the Forest Service is making a commitment to disclose to people living near the Allegheny National Forest what impact oil and gas drilling will have on water quality, recreational opportunities, and the other benefits they expect from the national forest in their backyard." said Andy Stahl, executive director of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics. "The Forest Service certainly has the duty to set conditions to prevent damage to the surface land it owns and protect wildlife on that land."

The settlement agreement stipulates that no oil and gas drilling can occur within Wilderness Study Areas, National Recreation Areas, Inventoried Roadless Areas, the Tionesta Scenic and Research Natural Areas, and the Morrison Run Area west to the Rimrock Overlook without environmental analysis and public comment and appeal opportunities.

"These areas contain some of the most remote wildlife habitat and recreation opportunities on the Allegheny National Forest," said Ryan Talbott, forest watch coordinator for the Allegheny Defense Project. "Because of this settlement, places like Minister Valley, Tracy Ridge, and Rimrock are now protected from unregulated oil and gas drilling. Additionally, the settlement agreement unequivocally states that 'the Forest Service has legal authority to establish reasonable conditions and mitigation measures to protect federal surface resources' from oil and gas drilling. This important acknowledgment signals a new direction for regulating oil and gas drilling on the Allegheny that will better protect water and air quality, wildlife habitat and recreation opportunities."

The settlement agreement creates an orderly transition allowing the drilling of approximately 585 oil and gas wells since these projects were already submitted to the Forest Service for approval at the time

the lawsuit was filed. The Forest Service will postpone approval of approximately 440 other oil and gas wells that were submitted to the Forest Service before the lawsuit was filed, but were considered "incomplete applications" by the Forest Service. Those proposed oil and gas wells, in addition to all future oil and gas drilling proposals, will be subject to NEPA analysis and public comment.

"This is a victory for everyone who enjoys the natural beauty of the Allegheny National Forest. This agreement will shed daylight on a process that has been hidden from public view for far too long." said Sierra Club representative David Sublette. "Oil and gas development threatens to destroy the sensitive wildlife habitat and spectacular wilderness that draw thousands of visitors to the Allegheny each year. The public should at least have an opportunity to weigh in before oil and gas companies are allowed to build roads and drill wells in this pristine area. This agreement represents a significant policy shift for the Allegheny National Forest."

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