

Senator John Barrasso

House Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

Testimony for Legislative Hearing on H.R. 1581, "Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act of 2011"

July 26, 2011

Thank you Chairman Bishop and Members of the Committee for inviting me to testify in support of the "Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act."

I introduced the companion bill, S. 1087, in the Senate, along with Senators Murkowski, Enzi, Hatch, and Heller. It is a pleasure to testify in favor of this bill along with Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy and House Western Caucus Chairman Rep. Steve Pearce.

I also want to acknowledge Wyoming County Commissioner Kent Connelly, who will testify today, for his work on public lands issues in Wyoming. Commissioner Connelly's testimony will provide insight on how this legislation will provide relief, from federal bureaucratic roadblocks in western rural counties.

Congress did not designate any wilderness in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act in 1976. What Congress did do was set aside over 70 million acres to temporarily study for possible wilderness designation. Federal agencies would make recommendations to Congress. Congress would then decide what areas should receive Wilderness designation.

However, the 1976 law created a giant loophole. The loophole allows all lands set aside for wilderness study to essentially be perpetually managed under wilderness criteria, not by multiple-use and sustainable yield provisions. The effect of this loophole was to create de facto wilderness areas across the West without Congressional approval.

That is why the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act is needed.

Of the 12.27 million acres of Wilderness Study Areas, BLM recommended 6.7 million acres as not suitable for wilderness designation. The U.S. Forest Service recommended 36 of the 61 million acres as not suitable. These decisions have been made for over 20 years.

This act ends the cycle of indefinite wilderness review and management of these non-wilderness recommended lands. The legislation allows local Americans and stakeholders, to work with agency officials to develop management plans that best balance recreation, multiple-use, and conservation. Every released acre and activity will be subject to the respective Forest Service or BLM land-use planning process.

Critics call this bill extreme. They declare passage would result in unchecked development and an ecologic disaster. Those who make these claims are ignorant of the facts, or disingenuous.

There is nothing extreme about following non-wilderness recommendations. There is nothing extreme about local stakeholders participating in the planning process. There is nothing extreme about land returning to the Forest Service or BLM land-use planning process. And there is nothing extreme about proactively managing forests impacted by the Mountain Pine Beetle. One of the biggest roadblocks in Wyoming to any management activity for the Pine Beetle is the 2001 Roadless Rule.

The fact is this is a common sense bill. Opponents want to rewrite history. They want to pretend Congress designated wilderness with the passage of FLPMA. They want to maintain the do-nothing status quo. They want to prevent local stakeholders and land management agencies from making land-planning decisions, and they are obstructing healthy forest management.

Former Secretary Babbitt has stated those who support this bill are operating in the shadows. I disagree. I am here in a public setting, advocating for public participation in land management.

This is in stark contrast Mr. Chairman to the secretive events creating the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in your home state of Utah, and announced from Arizona. This is in stark contrast to last year's leaked "Treasured Landscapes" internal effort by Department of Interior officials. This is in stark contrast to the December 23rd 'Wild Lands' announcement.

Mr. Chairman, this legislation is not in shadows, but in the light of day. This Act is good land management policy. It does not dictate what will or will not happen on the released lands. Rather, it returns management to the respective agencies. It provides them the flexibility to manage our public lands for a multitude of activities. More importantly, it gives local Americans, those who live, work, and play on public lands a voice.

I fully support this legislation and commend Representative McCarthy for his leadership on this issue. Thank you Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to testify.