

Before the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

Statement on HR 980

The Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act

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Thank you Chairman Grijalva, and members of the subcommittee for holding this hearing on HR 980, the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act or NREPA.

The US portion of the Northern or Wild Rockies is perhaps the only place in the lower 48 that still retains all of its native species since the arrival of people of European descent. HR 980 does right by the land. It is a proposal to enact landscape-scale conservation in a bioregion. It is informed by the latest science. It is the one place in the lower 48 we can get it right. The reason the area is still relatively intact and wild is because this part of the Rockies is largely public land owned by all Americans.

The Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act's time has come. Everyday conversation and political dialogue are finally catching up to the vision embodied in this bill. Indeed, the recent efforts at stimulating the economy through job creation by restoring public lands, somewhat reminiscent of the Civilian Conservation Corps, were in NREPA over decade ago in the Wildland Recovery Corps.

HR 980 is needed. For example, the 2001 roadless rule does not fully protect wild areas in spite of its good intentions. Furthermore, the recently adopted Idaho Roadless Rule, a much weakened version that applies only to the national forests in Idaho, would result in over three times as much roadbuilding and nearly two times as much logging in roadless, or formerly roadless areas, as the 2001 rule. NREPA is needed.

The explosion in off-road vehicle (ORVs) use and their attendant damage was recognized by former Forest Service Chief Bosworth as one of the major issues he wished to tackle during his tenure. However, Nixon and Carter issued the executive orders on off-road vehicles nearly forty years ago. Rather than meet the requirements of these orders, the backcountry has been gradually motorized while the Forest Service has done almost nothing. Only now is it beginning to address this issue, long after the horse left the barn. (See attached photos 1 and 2 of off-road vehicle damage in roadless areas that would be protected under NREPA).

In 1994, the Forest Service suggested in a hearing on NREPA, then HR 2638, that the bill was premature or unnecessary because the agency was moving ahead with protective plans implementing “ecosystem management” and broad scale assessments. If what was meant by ecosystem management was the loss of tens of thousands of prime acres of roadless backcountry in the wild Clearwater region in the intervening years, then the goal was accomplished. The broad scale assessments remain on the shelf. For example, the expensive Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project was never finalized with a record of decision. The Forest Service stated in 1994 “that our policies have moved strongly away from clear cutting” yet the record shows even-aged management, a general term for clearcutting, has continued. In the 1994 hearing the Forest Service claimed not only was the agency adopting new management techniques “but we monitor and evaluate.” The last forest plan monitoring report for the Nez Perce National Forest was in 2004. Many required items are not monitored in the Clearwater Basin national forests. The Forest Service also claimed that statewide wilderness bills would be forthcoming from Idaho and Montana. That was 15 years ago, plus one day, and no national forest wilderness bills have passed Congress and been signed by the President in those two states. The Forest Service stated biological corridors were best left to the “land management planning process.” One year earlier in 1993, the Forest Service promised to begin immediate revision of the Clearwater National Forest Plan. The Clearwater National Forest Plan has not been revised since 1987 and it is no closer today than it was in 1993. The National Forest Management Act requires forest plans be revised and updated every 10 years but not more than 15 years. In fact, all of the Clearwater Basin national forest plans date back to the late 80s. NREPA is needed because the Forest Service has been unable to do what it said it was going to do in 1994.

The Clearwater region is the place in the Wild Rockies closest to my heart, though the other wildlands are also spectacular. The Wild Clearwater country is the northern half of the largest relatively intact wild ecosystem in the lower 48 states. Though it goes by other names, the Big Wild is a fitting moniker. The Clearwater portion of this area is wetter and--according to a 2001 study by noted conservation biologists Carlos Carroll, Reed Noss and Paul Paquet--the most important place in the entire Rockies, including Canada, for large carnivores like grizzly bears, wolves and cougars. The rich diversity of the area is remarkable. Stands of giant ancient cedars, mountain hemlocks, and a variety of rain-loving plants remind one of the great rainforests of the coast. The fauna of this region is equally diverse with endemic species like the rare Coeur d'Alene and Idaho giant salamanders. Salmon, steelhead, wolves, wolverine, harlequin ducks, and the great bear--grizzly--are all found here. However, grizzlies are very, very rare in the Clearwater and in order to survive, NREPA's goals of protecting biological corridors and core habitat must be enacted.

NREPA would protect real places in the Clearwater--large, wild places--that form the core of this most important wildlife habitat. For example, Meadow Creek, a prime addition to the Selway - Bitterroot Wilderness, is important wild steelhead habitat. This past summer in Weitas Creek we tracked wolves and saw a big bull elk. This quarter-million acre gem epitomizes the best of the wild Clearwater. The wildflowers were amazing and we were the first people on the high divide before the rush of off-road vehicles that the Forest Service inappropriately allows on these fragile trails. (See attached photos 3, 4, 5 and 6 which are of the Weitas proposed wilderness). All these

wild things and wild places are connected, and we are connected to them. NREPA would make sure these wild connections continue, even in an era of global warming, for future generations of bears, salmon and people.