

**Testimony of
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Bureau of Land Management
Department of the Interior
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, & Public Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
H.R. 980, Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act
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Thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior to testify on H.R. 980, the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act. This legislation proposes wide-ranging designations on over 23 million acres of federal land in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington and Wyoming. These designations include wilderness, wild and scenic rivers and biological connecting corridors on lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service, and National Park Service (NPS). Many of the lands identified in this legislation deserve special designation. However, we are concerned that certain designations in the bill may present serious conflicts with uses that may be of importance to the public. The conservation designations in the recent Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (Public Law 111-11) may serve as a good model for refining this approach in H.R. 980 especially over such a broad and diverse set of lands.

In our testimony today, we will address proposed designations on lands administered by the BLM and the NPS. However, the vast majority of the designations in H.R. 980 are on lands administered by the Forest Service. We defer to the Forest Service on those designations.

Bureau of Land Management Designations

The BLM has not completed a full review of H.R. 980 as our review is hindered by the lack of detailed maps for BLM-managed areas proposed for designation. However, our preliminary review of available information suggests that the bill would designate as wilderness 19 areas, totaling nearly 382,000 acres and 13 biological connecting corridors covering 270,000 acres, to be managed solely by the BLM. Additional wilderness designations of 21 areas, totaling 2.3 million acres, and seven biological connecting corridors covering nearly 600,000 acres include lands managed by both the BLM and the Forest Service, though we are unable to determine what percentage of those acres are BLM administered lands without detailed maps.

We support resolution of the final status of BLM's Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) by Congress. First established in the 1980s under the direction of section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), WSAs were identified at the conclusion of a nationwide inventory of remaining roadless areas managed by the BLM. Only Congress can make a final decision on wilderness designation or release of lands currently designated as WSAs. We applaud recent efforts across the West, brought to fruition in the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, to designate many treasured landscapes as wilderness. These included both narrow designations – for example, an individual area such as the Sabinoso Wilderness in New Mexico and the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness in Colorado – and broad designations – such as county-wide proposals in Washington County, Utah; Owyhee County, Idaho; and

Riverside County, California. While there is no single model that works better than all others, these designations all involved extensive local and national debate and discussion, which was critical to their success. The Department of the Interior stands ready to participate in discussions about specific wilderness designations within the Northern Rockies.

H.R. 980 establishes the new designation of “Biological Connecting Corridors”. Some of the land identified for these corridors would be designated as units of the National Wilderness Preservation System and others would be under special corridor management. The Administration has not had the opportunity to fully consider the need for this new designation.

Based on the very general information available regarding the proposed designations, we believe it is clear that there are several BLM-managed lands much deserving of special designation in this proposal. However, we are concerned that the bill includes areas with substantial conflicts, including existing extensive road systems, mining claims, both renewable and nonrenewable energy development and applications, and perhaps national energy transmission corridors. These should be considered carefully to prevent unnecessary resource management conflicts.

National Park Service Designations

H.R. 980 would designate wilderness in Glacier (approximately 925,000 acres), Yellowstone (approximately 2,033,000 acres), and Grand Teton (approximately 123,000 acres) National Parks. The National Park Service (NPS) supports these wilderness designations, all of which were studied by the NPS in the 1970s and found to be suitable for wilderness designation. The recommendations to designate them as wilderness were forwarded to Congress but were not acted upon. Since the time that the three park areas were recommended for designation as wilderness, in accordance with the NPS Management Policies, they have been managed for their wilderness values.

The acreages shown in H.R. 980 for the three wilderness areas are similar to what was transmitted in the 1970s. However, the NPS reviewed these proposals in the 1990s and made some slight modifications and updates. The NPS would appreciate the opportunity to review specific maps and provide additional information on the proposed wilderness designations.

In addition to the three wilderness designations, portions of the Yellowstone River within Yellowstone National Park would be one of the more than 50 river segments designated as new wild and scenic rivers.

Conclusion

We look forward to future opportunities to expand the protection of treasured American landscapes realized in the recently enacted Omnibus Public Land Management Act. The models presented in that legislation may serve as guides to resolving wilderness and other designation issues throughout the west.