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“if it’s not Wild, it’s not Idaho”

Statement of Rick Johnson
Executive Director, Idaho Conservation League

U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands
June 6, 2002

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on HR 4620. It is a pleasure to see my friends in the Idaho House delegation.

For the past eight years I have been the executive director of the Idaho Conservation League. We work to protect and restore Idaho’s water, wildlands, and wildlife of Idaho through public education, citizen action, and professional advocacy. Our organization is nearly 30 years old, has three offices in Idaho, and we are the state’s largest conservation group.

Idaho has not passed a wilderness bill since 1980. In that time there have been several attempts led by members of the Idaho delegation, but none have reached this committee in well over a decade.

As a citizen activist, as a public lands lobbyist for the Sierra Club for eight years, and as staff of the Idaho Conservation League for a total of ten years, I have been involved in every legislative wilderness discussion in the state of Idaho since the River of No Return bill passed in 1980. I have more than a passing familiarity with Idaho’s wilderness. My first appearance before this committee to testify on wilderness issues was in 1984.

Getting a wilderness bill passed through Congress and signed by the president is very hard. You know better than I that passing any legislation is hard, but wilderness bills have a history of being particularly challenging in the West.

That said, I believe we have unprecedented opportunities to advance wilderness bills throughout the West and also in Idaho. While I have current and past experience with the national wilderness issues, I will limit my testimony to Idaho.

First, let me set the stage. Idaho is the Wilderness State. With over 4 million acres for designated wilderness and another 10 million or so acres that are unprotected, Wilderness is an identifying feature of our incredibly beautiful state. Twenty-one of the unprotected areas in Idaho are over 100,000 acres in size. To those familiar with wilderness issues, this is a remarkable statistic.

In rural Idaho today, as throughout much of the West, the impact of shrinking economies and urbanization are creating real pain. Counties are looking for a villain, and “procedurally locked up” roadless land is frequently it.

That is a false accusation. The economic and demographic forces impacting rural Idaho are far greater than any administrative procedures impacting Idaho's roadless lands.

Further, rural Idaho is being presented with a false hope for some Holy Grail of riches that would come from prospective development of the wildlands that an ever growing segment of Idaho would like to see protected. If these lands were valuable for development, the economic forces for that development would have long ago been more clear and successful in articulating a vision for these lands. Again, there are no barriers to development on many of these unprotected lands. Yes, Wilderness Study Areas retain barriers to development, but that is a minority of the undesignated lands in Idaho, and they became WSAs, in part, due to an absence of economic value.

I provide a review of the numerical impacts of HR 4620 and Idaho Conservation League wilderness recommendations as an attachment at the end of my written testimony, but history has clearly shown that when wilderness issues are reduced to numbers, everyone on all sides lose touch with what the real issues are.

My main point is that this bill is unnecessary, and casts a troublesome cloud on the opportunity before us in Idaho.

1. This bill assumes wilderness bills need a new catalyst. We disagree. If a catalyst is needed, let it be what it has always been: leadership from members of Congress. Successful wilderness bills result from a synergy between members of Congress and involved interest groups who do the hard work of building compromise and common ground. So what you can do as members of Congress is to assemble the interest groups, convene the meeting, and use your leadership to create the package.

That HR 4620 now originates in Idaho I find perplexing. To the best of my knowledge, Rep. Otter has never attempted to write a wilderness bill or assemble the appropriate interest groups to create one. On the other hand, Rep. Simpson has spoken to our organization a number of times about a variety of issues including wilderness potential for the Boulder White Clouds in Idaho's Second District. We have a working relationship, and his office convened a subset of interest groups on this subject just last week. Idaho's Sen. Crapo is similarly involved in good faith, direct discussions involving interest groups on the wilderness issue and other concerns in the Owyhee Canyonlands, and this has been going on for more than nine months.

My staff is talking with staff from Sen. Crapo and Rep. Simpson about wilderness and related issues on a regular basis, to do the hard work to achieve real solutions that include all interests. This is how we'll get the job done.

We don't need this bill in order to do the work Idaho needs to do to resolve wilderness issues. The Idaho delegation members who are interested are already engaged in trying to break the legislative logjam that has held this issue up for years.

2. HR 4620 places a huge amount of weight on the appropriateness of BLM Wilderness Study Areas and USFS wilderness recommendations.

I am similarly perplexed that Idaho's delegation—long critical of federal land agencies—would now advance legislation so fundamentally based on BLM and US Forest Service wilderness recommendations and WSAs. The Idaho Conservation League has grave problems with the BLM and USFS wilderness recommendations, and I am sure you do as well, though perhaps for different reasons.

These recommendations should play a consultative role in wilderness designation processes, but we all know that Congress is the final arbiter. Again, a legitimate wilderness process requires active engagement of members of Congress, not some artificial hammer.

3. Finally, HR 4620 is a major challenge to the wilderness movement of the entire United States.

I suspect an effort to undercut the wilderness movement is the intent of this bill. That is unfortunate, because that only fosters the wedges between rural and urban Idahoans we should all be working to bridge, and by doing so this bill fosters entirely unrealistic expectations for rural Idaho. Further, as we all know, it is easy to stall or never start a legislative process, so this bill by intent, is prejudiced against wilderness protection.

This bill will not pass because it is a fundamental assault on the historic and ultimately fair processes for advancing wilderness protection.

I once helped lead national-level campaigns for a national conservation group. I assure you HR 4620 will be fought hard by the environmental community. Ironically for the sponsors, I believe this fight will strengthen the national wilderness movement by providing a cause to rally around.

Over many years, in individual bills, Congress has debated and generally rejected “release language” as a trade off for designated wilderness. This bill releases lands regardless of designations; there isn’t even a proposed trade-off.

I am also troubled that national anti-environmental exposure only hurts Idaho’s already beleaguered reputation. Also, fighting this bill would hurt the good-faith wilderness discussions already underway in Idaho today, and in the future.

Summary

This bill is not needed. Idaho and the nation needs to move forward on wilderness issues, but that requires leadership not drop-dead deadlines. It requires a spirit of compromise and it requires a respect for the land. This bill demonstrates neither.

Wilderness protection is a well-established purpose of our public lands. Arbitrarily cutting off any and all consideration of future Wilderness designations makes no more sense than saying that all lands now not being logged should forever be banned from consideration for logging.

This is a great time to advance wilderness bills in Idaho the old-fashioned way.

- Politically speaking, Idaho is well positioned with the House, Senate, and administration. This presents an opportunity to craft a bill that has a true Idaho-approved identity to it, with a minimum of outside interference, yet still retains a high likelihood of passing Congress and being signed by the President.

A. Just as it took the established conservative credentials of Nixon to establish a relationship with China, it will take the conservative credentials of Western Republicans to successfully advance wilderness issues in Idaho. But unlike past attempts, we all must approach the resource and each other with a level of respect.

B. There is a motivated and increasingly sophisticated conservation community ready to get to work. The Idaho Conservation League is very closely involved in two processes right now to advance wilderness bills in Idaho, both engage the Idaho congressional delegation, and both could succeed. Success in either place will do far more to break the wilderness legislative logjam for Idaho.

Politics are the art of the possible, and wilderness bills pass because of successful engagement of politics. Let's do it, and that means putting aside HR 4620.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

HR 4620 and Idaho public lands ^[1]

Bureau of Land Management (BLM Lands)

Idaho has roughly 11.9 million acres of BLM lands. Only 1.8 million of those lands are managed as Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs). The BLM has only recommended half of these lands (972,239 acres) to be designated as wilderness. Only 802 acres of BLM lands are officially designated as wilderness in Idaho.

Conservation groups consider the both the BLM wilderness recommendations and the WSAs themselves to be inadequate. The Idaho Conservation League supports the Idaho Citizen's Desert Wilderness Proposal. This is a 3,420,000 acres proposal on BLM lands. This proposal also recommends that 590,000 additional acres be studied for eligibility for wilderness designation.

US Forest Service Lands

Idaho's National Forests contain 1,292,006 acres that have been recommended by the Forest Service to be designated as wilderness. HR 4620 would give only 10 years time for resolution of bills before all these lands would be released from further consideration as wilderness.

Conservation groups have long considered USFS wilderness recommendations to be woefully inadequate. The Idaho Conservation League supports a minimum of 6 of the 9 million acres of remaining roadless areas in the National Forests of Idaho be designated as wilderness. The remaining lands should remain undeveloped, unroaded, and wild in character.

Disclosure Requirement

A. This part to be completed by all witnesses:

1. **Name:** Rick Johnson
2. **Business address:** Idaho Conservation League, PO Box 844, Boise, Idaho 83701
3. **Business phone:** 208-345-6933; 208-344-0344 fax
4. **Organization:** Idaho Conservation League
5. **"Any training ..."** N/A
6. **"Any professional licenses..."** N/A
7. **"Any employment, occupation, ownership in a firm or business, or work-related"**

experiences which relate to your qualifications to testify on or knowledge of the subject matter of the hearing:"

I have been involved in efforts to preserve and protect wilderness and elements of the wild character of the West for nearly 20 years.

This work includes time as a citizen engaged in public process—it was as a volunteer citizen activist that I first addressed this committee in 1984. In 1985 I began work as the Public Lands Director of the Idaho Conservation League and was engaged in Idaho wilderness protection efforts until 1987 when I took a job with the Sierra Club. I worked for the Sierra Club as a public lands specialist on issues ranging from Idaho wilderness, protection of the Pacific Northwest's ancient forests, protection of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and others. During that time I spent many months directly engaged with these issues in Congress. In early 1995, I returned to Idaho to take the position of executive director of the Idaho Conservation League.

8. **"Any offices, elected positions..."** N/A

B. To be competed by non-governmental witnesses only:

1. **Any federal grants or contracts...since October 1, 1998...** N/A
2. **Any federal grants....** N/A
3. **Any other information you wish to convey which might aid the members of the Committee to better understand the context of your testimony:** No

[\[1\]](#) Source: The Wilderness Society, Idaho Regional Office.