

**Testimony of Congressman Steve Pearce before the Subcommittee on National Parks,
Forest and Federal Lands
July 26, 2011**

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, and Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for holding this hearing today on HR 1581, Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act of 2011. As Chairman of the Congressional Western Caucus, I am proud to be an original cosponsor. At no point in time has legislation like this been more important. As we speak, large portions of the west continue to burn. And these fires burn hotter and faster than they have in years past. This endangers the lives of humans, plants and animals, and destroys any possibility of any species benefitting from the forest.

The West is very familiar with wilderness designations, and my district knows them better than any other. One of the first declared wilderness areas under the 1964 Wilderness Act, the Gila Wilderness, is in my district. While I do not necessarily oppose the designation of wilderness in areas that qualify by the strict definitions of the 1964 Act, it is absurd that the federal government continues to treat millions of acres that do not qualify as de facto wilderness. For example, a wilderness area is defined as an area of undeveloped federal land that “generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable”, according to the text of the Act. The Gila fits this definition.

However, as with other areas throughout the West, there are Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) within my district that do not meet the criteria of this definition, according to the Department of the Interior’s New Mexico Wilderness Study Report from 1991, which is the last comprehensive study of WSAs. In Dona Ana County, for example, the Robledo Mountains WSA is deemed unsuitable because of frequent motorized vehicle use and air traffic from Las Cruces International Airport. The Sierra de Las Uvas WSA is also considered unsuitable due to off-road vehicle use. 20 years later, both of these WSAs are governed by the same regulations as actual wilderness, despite the Department of the Interior deeming them unsuitable. This means that no chainsaws can be used to clear underbrush and dead timber for fire prevention. Trucks cannot come in to haul off material that can set these areas ablaze. Last week 4,500 acres of the Gila Wilderness burned due to lightning, and fire crews had difficulty navigating the rugged terrain of the wilderness to actually fight the fires. While much of the West continues to burn, how much sense does it make to keep unsuitable areas under such restrictive regulations? These areas are tinderboxes, just waiting for a lightning strike or some other spark to ignite a conflagration. This story plays out time and time again across the West.

It makes much more sense to release these WSAs than to just keep them in this constant state of limbo. Releasing them will keep them under federal ownership, and opens them up to the same management practices available on other federal lands. This will allow the various federal agencies to conduct proper land management to prevent the spread of wildfires, and keep these lands healthy for both people and animals to enjoy. Preventing us from releasing these WSAs only keeps us from implementing commonsense solutions that can keep our forests thriving, and maintain thriving habitats that actually benefit wildlife. The way to do this is to move these WSAs into the Multiple Use category. Some people hear Multiple Use and think that it leads to degradation of the environment. It does not. It maintains a proper balance to keep the forests and

other natural areas alive. It maintains a healthy wildlife balance. Plus, it can lead to economic growth through managed timber harvesting.

Similarly, in 1979, the Forest Service recommended that 36 million acres of Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) in its last comprehensive study of roadless areas, known as the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation II (RARE II). In RARE II, the Forest Service recommended 36 million acres of IRAs are not suitable for wilderness designation, about the size of the state of Michigan. Nearly 1.2 million acres in New Mexico are not suitable, which equates to the state of Delaware. This bill would lift the restrictive practices on these giant tracts of land that put the welfare and livelihood of the West at risk, and preclude job creation.

Another positive benefit of releasing these WSAs will be in our watersheds. Overgrown forest areas dry out our aquifers and rivers, leaving the West ready to burn, and cutting off needed water for our communities to use for basic services, including fire fighting.

I am proud to be here today as an original cosponsor of this important piece of legislation, and urge my colleagues to support it. H.R. 1581 is good for the West and good for America. It will allow more Americans to enjoy our federal lands, and allow us to actually protect the habitats of wildlife through proper land management. Again, I think the Chairman and Ranking Member for conducting this hearing today, and I look forward to answering your questions.