

**Statement of Chris French**  
**Associate Deputy Chief, National Forest System**  
**U.S. Forest Service, United States Department of Agriculture**  
**Before the**  
**House Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Subcommittee on Federal Lands**  
**Concerning**  
**H.R. 5148, Protect Public Use of Public Lands Act**  
**June 21, 2018**

Chairman McClintock and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regarding H.R. 5148, the Protect Public Use of Public Lands Act.

Under the Montana Wilderness Study Area Act of 1977, nine areas totaling 973,000 acres were identified as wilderness study areas to be evaluated for designation as wilderness in accordance with the Wilderness Act. As required by the 1977 Act, studies for each of the areas were completed in the early 1980s. The findings in those initial studies were carried forward in the first round of land management planning as either recommendations or non-recommendations for wilderness designation. In response to those recommendations, Congress has designated 171,000 acres as wilderness and released 139,000 acres from the Act. There are 663,000 acres that remain as wilderness study areas pending Congressional action.

Since the initial study, National Forest units in Montana with wilderness study area lands have recently finished or have begun the evaluation process required by the Forest Service land management planning regulations. Based on current conditions and public engagement, forests have proposed changes to the 1980-era recommendations for wilderness designations. The Helena- Lewis and Clark National Forest is currently accepting public comment on the draft environmental impact statement and the Forest's draft revised land management plan. The plan revision includes evaluations of the Big Snowies and Middle Fork Judith Wilderness Study Areas. Portions of both of these Wilderness Study Areas could be recommended for wilderness designation depending on the Alternative selected. The Wilderness Study Area status of lands is not determinative of whether or not an area is recommended for designation as wilderness.

The Department supports H.R. 5148 and releasing wilderness study area designations we have not recommended as wilderness in land management planning.

If this bill were to be enacted, the Forests would complete the appropriate administrative change for each affected land management plan to remove the wilderness study area designation and associated direction. Management for the released acres would then be subject to the remaining applicable plan direction.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I would be happy to answer any questions.