

**Statement of Congressman C.L. "Butch" Otter  
House Committee on Resources  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands  
June 6, 2002**

Thank you Mr. Chairman for holding this hearing today and inviting me to attend.

I recently introduced H.R. 4620, the America's Wilderness Protection Act. Its goal is to resolve what in most cases has become a decades-long process of deliberating the fate of "wilderness study areas" - millions of acres of public land made untouchable for multiple use while federal agencies and Congress consider whether they warrant permanent wilderness status.

My bill, cosponsored by 33 fellow Congressmen including many members of this committee, would release all areas designated as wilderness study areas from such status on the earlier of 10 years after this act becomes law, the date the area is designated as wilderness by act of Congress or the date that the Secretary of Interior or Agriculture determines that the area is unsuitable for wilderness designation. Wilderness Study Areas released from the designation would revert back to their previous use.

Currently, environmental obstructionists have no incentive to help reach decisions on wilderness designations that might give them less than they want. To a large degree, they already have their victory. The status quo guarantees all the study areas continue to be treated as wilderness.

Despite officially making allowances for historical uses, land managers understandably err on the side of caution and set rules maintaining "wilderness values," restricting access to natural resources that might help restore jobs in rural communities.

Many of our rural communities have been in limbo too long. In Idaho, for example, there are 86 wilderness study areas totaling about 3.1 million acres. Of the 67 Bureau of Land Management parcels, 63 have been locked up as de facto wilderness since 1981 or 1982 – *even though 40 of them have been found unsuitable for wilderness protection*. The other four have been withdrawn from multiple use since 1976.

Most of the 19 Forest Service wilderness study areas have been in place since the mid-1980s and two have held that status since 1972. All the while - through the administration of seven presidents and during the entire lifetime of many working people in Idaho - there has been no requirement on the government nor impetus for obstructionists to fish or cut bait.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 created the "Wilderness Study Area" concept. Lands that became Wilderness Study Areas were to be studied to determine whether they qualified for wilderness designation. Unfortunately, these laws failed to provide for the release of those lands when the studies were complete. Absent congressional action or consensus among stakeholders on setting aside a specific parcel, that's caused Wilderness Study Areas to be studied in perpetuity - even after the actual studies were finished.

The perpetual study of an area for wilderness suitability is clearly not in the public interest. The Americas Wilderness Protection Act will bring some closure to Wilderness Study Areas. If an area is truly worthy of the wilderness label, Congress should designate it as such. But if Congress can't support such a designation, how then can we support continuing to have that land locked away from active management?

With this act's 10-year buffer and the 20 to 30 years that so many of these areas already have spent in limbo, we're talking about a generation during which people will have been essentially barred from some of our most valuable opportunities to recreate, improve habitat and watersheds, protect against diseases and insect infestation, and other beneficial uses of our natural resources. I believe this legislation is an important effort to raise the level of debate on wilderness, promote resolution and hold everyone involved accountable for the outcome. Idaho's rural communities, and rural communities across the West, need certainty and self-determination for managing their natural resources and improving their economies.

Thank you again Mr. Chairman and I look forward to hearing the testimony and insight of our witnesses.