

TESTIMONY OF
NOEL WILLIAMS

ON BEHALF OF

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS - LINCOLN COUNTY, MONTANA
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS - MINERAL COUNTY, MONTANA
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS – SANDERS COUNTY, MONTANA
MONTANA COALITION OF FOREST COUNTIES

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS, NATIONAL PARKS AND FORESTS

THE HONORABLE RAUL GRIJALVA, CHAIRMAN

OCTOBER 18, 2007

WASHINGTON, D.C.

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE
SUBCOMMITTEE:

Greetings from the great state of Montana, and thank you for this opportunity to appear before you and speak to the proposed Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act.

My name is Noel Williams and I am here on behalf of the Boards of County Commissioners of Lincoln, Mineral, and Sanders counties in western Montana, and also with the authorization to speak for the Montana Coalition of Forest Counties, which includes in its membership the commissioners of 34 of Montana's 56 counties.

As a former long-time county commissioner, and as a previous director of the Western Interstate Region – a coalition of county leaders in the 18 western-most states under the aegis of the National Association of Counties – I can assure you, ladies and gentlemen, that those local elected officials for whom I speak really are the voice of the people in their respective areas, and further, that their voices are united on this proposed legislation; one huge voice in opposition.

Further, among your own colleagues I see no foundation of support from members who represent the districts directly impacted by this proposal, and who should have the greatest voice in promulgating policy affecting their constituencies. I and those I represent agree with Representative Rehberg of Montana when he says this is bad legislation because it is a “top-down” approach that considers neither input from, nor impacts on, local economies and communities. I have been involved in wilderness debates and

controversies for more than 20 years, and am just now beginning to fully recognize the importance of local collaboration in achieving resolution, one area at a time. Collaborative groups consisting of diverse stakeholders at the local level are currently having great success in helping federal agencies design projects on the forests that satisfy needed goals without inviting litigation. I see a trend toward using this successful process in future policy discussion relative to recreation, travel, wilderness, etc. on our National Forests. Legislation such as you are considering here today would devastate this process.

Twenty-five million acres of new wilderness and de-facto wilderness, about a third of which would be in my state of Montana, all in one fell swoop! Wow! And all promulgated with no consultation or concurrence with our local leaders, our state officials, our governor, or our congressional delegation. “Well,” you might say, “it is federal land owned equally by all of us, not just by those of you who live in proximity to it.” We do accept that premise; however, we also accept that the people who live in communities proximate to these areas, communities whose history, culture, economy, social structure, employment opportunities, and recreational opportunities are all entwined with these areas and how they are managed, should be the first and most heavily weighted link in the chain of communication that results in management policy decisions.

For example, those of us who are most proximate to the areas

under consideration know many thousands of acres included are seriously out of sync with historic conditions, have missed several cycles of natural burns, and are heavily laden with hazardous fuel loads. This, in conjunction with recent drought conditions, insures a future of catastrophic stand-replacing wildfires that will not be contained without spreading to adjacent public and private lands. Wilderness classification does not provide for the active management treatments needed to provide for reducing this risk.

For example, those of us who are most proximate to the areas under consideration know that among the thousands of miles of streams envisioned by this proposal to be added to our National Scenic, Recreation, or Wild Rivers System, there are far too many small tributaries, some of which nearly disappear in dry years. Attendant restrictions would result in the loss of adaptive management capabilities that could stave off future wildfires that would obliterate that which the proposal deems to “save”.

Overall, this proposal seems to us to simply articulate the entire wish list of those who have long yearned to remove humans from environmental equations. The limits called for here are not responsible. We are not, by opposing this legislation, calling for more development, more roads, more resource extraction, or more ecological degradation; rather, we do recognize the importance of implementing wildlands protection policies and perpetuating opportunities for wilderness experiences. Further, we believe this can be done without the rigid inflexibility of formal Wilderness designation on such a large scale, a designation that disallows a broad range of uses that the resources could potentially allow, and

precludes the kind of future active management activities that might become desirable given inevitable unforeseen and ever-changing needs in our physical or social environment.

Why, we ask, should we want to give up many of the management options, opportunities, and tools that when used reasonably and scientifically, can add ecological diversity and enhancements for forest vegetation, for wildlife, and for humans ??

I am reminded here of a statement in the Public Lands Policy of the Montana Association of Counties, to wit: "... the resolution of conflicts will most often be found in a multiple-use format that conserves and not preserves, that uses but not wastes, that respects but not abuses, and that shares but not hoards the many resources on our public lands."

Finally, to provide added legitimacy to our position, I would remind this subcommittee that the Montana State Legislature, in its 2007 session, passed a resolution urging members of Congress to "vigorously" oppose this act and to vote "against ...at every opportunity."

That concludes my testimony here today, Mr. Chairman, and once again we thank you for this hearing and for this opportunity.