

Testimony from  
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National Wildlife Federation, before the  
Subcommittee on Federal Lands of the House Natural Resources Committee  
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On behalf of the National Wildlife Federation and its six million members and supporters, I respectfully submit this testimony on HR 5148 and HR 5149, which combined would strip protections from more than 800,000 acres of Wilderness Study Areas in Montana.

The National Wildlife Federation believes our public lands are part of the American identity – they sustain fish and wildlife, and provide outdoor recreation and deliver clean air and water. Protecting these natural resources is a cause that has long united Americans from all walks of life and political stripes: hunters, anglers, hikers, birders, wildlife watchers, boaters, climbers, campers, cyclists, gardeners, farmers, forest stewards, and other outdoor enthusiasts. This conservation ethic represents a sacred duty and obligation to protect and build upon our conservation heritage for the sake of wildlife, ourselves, our neighbors, and—most of all—future generations.

NWF has worked with a wide variety of stakeholders to champion conservation of our wild places for over thirty years in Montana. Since 1982, 23 bills have been introduced by members of Montana’s Congressional delegation to address Montana’s wilderness study and/or roadless areas. Every single bill contained both wilderness designation and wilderness study or roadless area release. Many also addressed recreation, forest restoration, tribal interests, land exchanges, and other components important to diverse stakeholders. For myriad reasons, and due to some notable moments in history, only two of the bills passed. As such, the future of 44 places designated as Wilderness Study Areas remain in question.

It is past time to successfully address the question of Montana’s wilderness study areas. This must be, and can be, done in a balanced manner that supports conservation, recreation, restoration, economic development and incorporates the views of a wide variety of stakeholders.

Montanans understand that every American owns our federal lands. We also have a deep connection to the wild lands in our state. We find solace in them. They sustain our families. We strengthen family bonds in them. We earn our livings in them. We ground ourselves in them. Because we love these places, we have consistently weighed in with our congressional delegation about the management of these special landscapes. We in Montana want to be sure the delegation’s debates in Congress about managing these lands on behalf of all Americans are informed by Montanan values. Quite simply, these lands are interwoven with who we are as Montanans.

They are so important that 30 years ago, multiple interest groups shouted loudly from their respective corners. They left it to the delegation to find fair and equitable solutions to our collective public lands management challenges. That dynamic has slowly changed, and now, a spirit of collaboration has driven us to find common ground on how best to manage both working and wild lands. Loggers and mill owners as well as snowmobilers have supported wilderness designation, while conservationists have supported timber harvest and designation of motorized national recreation areas.

It is hard work to hear, understand, and support your former opponents' interests to the point that those interests become yours. But that has happened in Montana. People are rolling up their sleeves, listening to each other, and developing plans that protect some public lands as wilderness while setting some areas aside for other uses. We have seen collaboration bring people together around thorny natural resource issues from timber country in Yaak and Deer Lodge, to ranching in Ovando to outdoor recreation in Bozeman and those are but a few of the examples. People from all walks of life, working together to find common ground.

Our neighbors in Idaho have similar success stories. In the last decade, Senator Mike Crapo invited ranchers, conservationists and recreationists to resolve long contentious land management issues in the Owyhee region in southwestern Idaho. The result was a series of recommendations for wilderness and active management that were enacted into law in 2009. More recently, Congressman Mike Simpson used the results of a collaborative process to designate the Boulder-White Clouds Wilderness in 2016. Both these bills brought previously warring interest groups together in a common solution, helped resolve deep political divisions, and provided an array of land management improvements that benefitted the agencies, the public and wild land and wildlife resources. These bills should inform the committee.

However, the two Montana bills the committee considers today are a radical turn away from this kind of collaborative, community driven conservation. Not one public meeting or town hall has been held in Montana on the topic of these bills, despite requests to do so. Not one.

This could account for why a recent poll from the University of Montana conducted jointly by both Republican and Democratic polling firms showed only 11% of Montanans support eliminating all protections in these WSAs.

Further, 97% say it is important—with 77% saying it is very important—that a wide range of stakeholders and local communities have the opportunity to provide input before decisions are made.

In that spirit, over a dozen sportsmen groups, including NWF, have offered in writing to help bring diverse stakeholders together to make recommendations, forged by collaboration, on the disposition of these important Wilderness Study Areas. We stand ready to help.

Process aside, NWF is also concerned about the substance of the bills before the committee today. The sponsor purports to have followed decades-old agency recommendations, but only the recommendations for releasing areas have been followed. The bill does not include any wilderness designation recommended by the agencies.

Further, HR 5149 overrides the agency's recommendations for wilderness in portions of six of the WSAs and releases those acres instead (Blacktail Mountains, Centennial Mountains, Farlin Creek, Ruby Mountains, Seven Blackfoot, and Terry Badlands).

If the sponsor truly intended to follow agency recommendations, this error should be fixed. In addition, the bills should provide balance by following agency recommendations for designation as well.

However, agency recommendations are only a guidepost, a snapshot from decades ago that deserve another look. For the past 54 years, Congress has reserved for itself the discretion to designate Wilderness, and has almost always erred on the side of more not less.

In the decades since these agency recommendations, snowmobiling has become a more active use in the West Pioneers, as modern sleds and snow bikes can go extending into acres not reachable 30 years ago. Instead of simply releasing these lands, perhaps a national recreation area designation should be considered to better reflect the current uses. That designation could also provide important summer protections for wildlife habitat and clean water that the West Pioneers deliver to the blue-ribbon fisheries of the Big Hole River, home to four species of trout, whitefish and a rare, recovering population of fluvial arctic grayling.

The Big Snowies WSA provides drinking water for Lewistown. As the town and state's population grows, protecting this source of water should be considered in any land use decisions, which it wasn't 30 years ago. In fact, three of the five alternatives in the new, draft Helena / Lewis and Clark National Forest management plan released just two weeks ago call for wilderness designation of the WSA. As one of Montana's island mountain ranges, the Big Snowies provide the only high elevation habitat and public hunting grounds for miles around. These mountains provide important security habitat for elk, black bear, and mountain lions – supporting backcountry hunting opportunities in the WSA, and healthy wildlife populations benefiting hunters at lower elevations.

Because of incredible advances in remote sensing and GPS technology, biologists have a much better understanding of wildlife corridors than they did 30 years ago. Places such as the Centennial Mountains WSA, which provides a critical east-west corridor flowing from Yellowstone National Park, needs an updated look. The Centennial Mountains support the conservation of the Yellowstone grizzly bear

population and can help keep them off the endangered species list by providing a mostly secure avenue for them to expand their habitat toward the unoccupied Selway-Bitterroot recovery zone of central Idaho. The Centennials are also considered an important movement corridor and habitat for other species that benefit from designated wilderness such as elk, moose, wolves, and wolverines.

For hunters and anglers, these areas provide clean water for trout and secure cover for elk and deer. Elk need large, undisturbed areas like the Sapphires, West Pioneers and Big Snowies for security. Many of these protected areas serve as critical migratory pathways for elk and mule deer. All hunters benefit from these areas, even those who don't hunt in them.

In fact, according to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, 70% of the elk harvested in the state are taken from Regions 3 & 4, southwest and north central Montana, respectively. Over half of the WSAs released in this bill are in these two regions.

As our country grows and develops, the WSAs in these bills now stand out for their exceptional wildlife habitat and wilderness qualities, as reflected in hunting statistics and scientific journals.

A recent study published in the journal *Land* (2018, 7(2), 69; doi:[10.3390/land7020069](https://doi.org/10.3390/land7020069)) compared five qualities of wildland value in the 29 WSAs represented in these two bills to existing national parks and designated wilderness areas. The results are astonishing. According to the report:

- All five Forest Service WSAs in HR 5148 and 18 of the 24 Bureau of Land Management WSAs in HR 5149 are more wild than half of our country's national parks and designated wilderness areas combined.
- All of the WSAs in the two bills have similar and seven have darker night skies, than half of our country's national parks and wilderness areas combined.
- All had similar landscape quietness values and 12 were quieter than half our national parks and wilderness areas combined.
- All had similar levels of habitat integrity for mammals, and 14 had higher than half our national parks and wilderness areas combined.
- On average, all had higher carnivore habitat integrity than half our national parks and wilderness areas. Five of the WSAs had estimates higher than 90% of our national parks and wilderness areas.

In short, while these lands are beloved by Montanans, they hold significant wilderness and wildlife values for the nation.

Scientists tell us that we risk losing one third of our nation's wildlife – some 12,000 species – in the coming decades. Rather than releasing important tracts of some of our best remaining intact, high value wildlife habitat to potential energy and mineral development, roads and trails, and other activities that could harm wildlife, we should be protecting it.

We urge the committee to not advance these bills until a collaborative group of stakeholders can bring recommendations, driven by current science, to Congress.

In the past few months, this committee has accomplished several bipartisan victories for conservation, including strengthening the Federal Land Transaction Facilitation Act and improving management of our National Forests. We urge you to build upon these successes by prioritizing other bipartisan, collaborative legislative solutions that help conserve our shared wildlife and public lands heritage, such as permanently reauthorizing the Land and Water Conservation Fund, meaningfully funding states' work to support declining wildlife populations through the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, and maintaining the infrastructure of our National Parks, National Wildlife Refuges, and other public lands.