

STATEMENT OF THE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, U.S. FOREST SERVICE

TO THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
REGARDING:

H.R. 6788 MONTANA SPORTSMEN CONSERVATION ACT
H.R. ____ CROSSETT EXPERIMENTAL FOREST ACT OF 2026

SEPTEMBER 2, 2026

Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Huffman, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regarding two bills: H.R. 6788 Montana Sportsmen Conservation Act and H.R. ____ Crossett Experimental Forest Act of 2026.

H.R. 6788, “Montana Sportsmen Conservation Act”

The Montana Sportsmen Conservation Act proposes releasing three Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) in Montana to general federal land management. Two WSAs are on federal lands managed by the BLM. The Forest Service comments focus on the third WSA, the Middle Fork of the Judith Wilderness Study Area, located in the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest in central Montana.

The Act would release all 81,000 acres originally identified as a WSA under the Montana Wilderness Study Act of 1977. In accordance with the Montana Wilderness Study Act, in 1982 the Forest Service completed a Final Environmental Impact Statement and study of the Big Snowies and Middle Fork Judith WSAs. The Act required that these areas be monitored to ensure the WSAs’ potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System was retained. At that time, the Forest Service recommended the Middle Fork of the Judith WSA be managed as non-wilderness primarily due to the presence of 14 miles of primitive roads and 36 miles of low-standard road, with motorized and mechanized use predating the 1977 Montana Wilderness Study Act. Subsequent land management plans, including the 2021 Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest Plan, maintained this recommendation.

USDA supports S. 3527. The action proposed for the Middle Fork of the Judith WSA in the Montana Sportsmen Conservation Act aligns with historic agency recommendations dating back nearly four decades. If released, the wilderness study area direction would no longer apply, and management would follow the Forest’s 2021 land management plan forest-wide direction, and applicable area plan direction. Releasing the area would give land managers more flexibility to

improve forest health, mitigate wildfire risk, and provide for multiple use values while retaining certain protections for the area.

H.R. , “Crossett Experimental Forest Act of 2026”

The Crossett Experimental Forest Act requires the Secretary of Agriculture to convey the Crossett Experimental Forest, a 1,680-acre research forest, to the State of Arkansas. Upon transfer of the land, the State will manage the forest – to be known as the “Crossett State Forest” – for research, education, and demonstration purposes, in coordination with the University of Arkansas. The State will cover any costs associated with conveyance of the land, and if the State fails to manage the forest in accordance with the bill’s stated uses, ownership will revert to the Federal government.

The Crossett has been a Forest Service research site since 1934 when the land was donated by the Crossett Lumber Company to support long-term, practical forestry research. Since that time, the Crossett has helped shape sustainable pine management across the South through long-term studies, on-the-ground demonstrations, and science delivery and educational outreach, all of which have benefited landowners and resource managers. The Crossett is currently managed by the Ouachita National Forest, although the Crossett is non-contiguous and located approximately 145 miles from the Forest’s headquarters in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Work at the Crossett has been defined by long-standing partnerships with the State of Arkansas and the University of Arkansas system. For decades, faculty, students, and researchers have used the forest as a living classroom and research platform. These collaborative research and demonstration efforts have supported landowners, strengthened regional forestry capacity, and advanced practical, applied science.

Within the boundary of the Crossett is the R.R. Reynolds Research Natural Area, an 80-acre stand that has been maintained with limited human management and intervention. It provides an important reference point for understanding natural forest conditions, which complements the applied research and demonstration work conducted elsewhere on the site.

The bill directs conveyance of all right, title, and interest to the State by quitclaim deed, without consideration, contingent on written request from the State. This structure is straightforward for implementation and is unlikely to be resource intensive; the Forest Service will need to complete several technical and administrative steps, including boundary confirmation, title documentation, and CERCLA §120(h) environmental disclosures. The bill’s reversionary clause, which provides the United States with authority to reclaim ownership if the State ceases to use the Forest for research, education, and demonstration purposes, is consistent with prior Congressional conveyances of research sites where long-term mission continuity is desired.

The Crossett Experimental Forest has a strong legacy of research, education, and partnership. USDA supports this proposed legislation, which would continue the Crossett's legacy and ensure that its mission remains intact.