



Dear Members of the House Natural Resources Committee,

Members of the House Natural Resources Committee, we appreciate the opportunity to testify in front of you in regards to H.R. 6788 "Montana Sportsmen Conservation Act". Montana Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife (MTSFW) is a non-profit grassroots Sportsmen's organization with hundreds of members that are hunters, ranchers and loggers, all Montana residents.

In a state often known for its outdoors and larger-than-life wildlife, we often hear a lot of discussion about the need to improve our wildlife's habitats. Recently, through a statewide planning process regarding elk management, much of the discussion by a citizen appointed committee was focused on improving our lands and increasing access to some elk populations that are as much as 300% over the state's objectives. Releasing public land from a Wilderness Study Area designation simply would allow land management agencies (US Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management) to help advance forest management projects for enhancing forest health, and providing habitat improvement for wildlife that all Montanans agree needs to happen.

The "Montana Sportsmen Conservation Act" removes one of the onerous layers of red tape that impedes the ability of Montanans to properly manage just over 100,000 acres of public land according to the best available science and public input.

Currently, and for nearly 50 years it has been harder or impossible to implement active measures to improve wildlife habitat due to Middle Fork Judith, Hoodoo Mountain and Wales Creek Wilderness Study Areas (WSA) designations, despite the recommendations of the US Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management recommending that these areas are not suitable for Wilderness designation.

This unnecessary designation not only prevents the agencies from doing what's best for the wildlife that call these WSA's home, but it completely silences the voices of Montanan's voices from the managing process.

H.R. 6788 would return all three WSA's to general management by the controlling land agencies, this would empower Montanan's to be involved in decisions that are best for the lands they know and most of all, improve the habitats of wildlife in the area.

Importantly, H.R. 6788 would still require that the US Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management follow all existing strong environmental laws including the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Administrative

Procedures Act (APA), with federal protections like the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the 2001 Roadless Rule remaining intact.

Returning these lands to general management, for example, the US Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management would finally be able to implement vegetation management to restore wildlife habitats in the Middle Fork Judith WSA, specifically benefitting elk herds that are being pushed out of federal forests because of a lack of grazing opportunities onto private lands, which in some cases make the elk unavailable to Montana elk hunters and cause depredation issues on private lands.

If released from the WSA designation, the Hoodoo Mountain and Wales Creek WSA's would be managed as Backcountry Conservation Areas (BCA) or as Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), which means that both would retain critical wildlife habitat protections while providing the land management agencies the flexibility to do needed work to manage and improve habitat. A BCA designation would help support wildlife-dependent recreation and hunting opportunities, and facilitate the long-term viability of big game wildlife populations.

These WSA's have become tinder boxes with dead diseased trees and in many cases nearly impossible to traverse because of dead fallen timber. Just this year the Hoodoo Mountain WSA was the source of a fire and thousands of acres burned to ash, this is what happens to these areas. Many counties in Montana such as Beaverhead county have vast amounts of acreage in WSA's, Beaverhead county alone has over 300,000 acres of these WSA's and they are negatively impacting sportsmen, ranchers and the logging industry. NGO's across the country fight these WSA releases, but the people that live here and are most impacted are begging to have them opened up.

Montanans know best on how to manage the wildlife we encounter every day, and not having the ability to manage and maintain habitats according to the best available science is a shame. Please pass this bill and give Montanans the tools they need to manage their lands, manage wildlife and protect their Montana way of life. MTSFW strongly supports "The Montana Sportsmen's Conservation Act".

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