

**Statement of
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U.S. Department of Agriculture
Before the
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Natural Resources Committee
United States House of Representatives**

May 5, 2009

Concerning

H.R. 980, Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to provide the Department's view on H.R. 980, the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act.

We appreciate the intent of the bill in terms of protecting important landscapes and biological corridors as well as the work of those who seek to protect these special places. National Forests in the states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington and Wyoming have truly remarkable features and provide important habitat for many species. Nevertheless, we have ongoing planning efforts that are working towards many of these outcomes and numerous others with an approach that better involves those who work and live in the affected communities. Therefore, we support additions to the wilderness preservation system and the wild and scenic river system using the existing land management and study processes that we are currently using throughout the region.

The proposal contained within the Bill provides important insights and information for agency decision makers to utilize in analyzing future management options throughout this region. We applaud those who have worked on this proposal and look forward to engaging those who are advocating on behalf of the values contained herein.

In the Northern Region of the Forest Service, revision of 1980s-era forest plans are underway. Organizations with diverse interests who, in the past, have been at odds with each other (wilderness advocates, wildlife and fisheries groups, mountain bikers, snowmobilers, timber companies, mill owners and ranchers) are working collaboratively with the Forest Service to resolve differences and come to agreement on the best approach to national forest management. This bill would, unfortunately, shortcut much of this collaboration and collective ownership of solutions.

To date, nationwide, Congress has designated over thirty-five million National Forest System acres in the National Wilderness Preservation System. The wilderness designations in titles I and II of the bill would increase that amount significantly. Title I would add over nineteen million acres to the existing wilderness system. Title II of the bill would designate an additional 7.8 million acres of “biological connecting corridors”, with some acres designated as wilderness and others subject to special corridor management requirements under title II. Some of the areas proposed for designation are consistent with our publicly vetted Forest Plans. However, many are not.

To date, nationwide, Congress has designated almost five thousand miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers to be managed by the US Forest Service. Title III of this bill would add two thousand miles of designated rivers in the five-state area. Again, some of the rivers proposed for designation in this bill are consistent with our publicly vetted Forest Plans. Some have been designated through the recently passed Omnibus Lands Bill. However, the bill proposes designating additional Wild and Scenic rivers before the agency has had the opportunity to analyze whether they are suitable for such designation, as required by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. This may create issues with private property owners, recreational access, mining claimants and permittees whose livelihood may depend on the forest..

The US Forest Service works through a variety of site-specific, locally-based planning processes to identify areas that are in need of restoration treatments due to fire, erosion and other natural and non-natural causes. Title IV of H.R. 980 would designate over one million acres as “wildland recovery areas” and components of a “National Wildland Recovery and Restoration System” without the benefit of a publicly vetted plan, including an analysis of tradeoffs at the local, regional and national level.

Today the agency uses a variety of service and youth corps, volunteer organizations, employees, and contracting options to accomplish our restoration work. Regarding youth opportunities, the Forest Service has a long history, current successful programs as well as a vision for connecting young people to their natural world. Title IV would establish a new National Wildland Recovery Corps to develop a wildland recovery plan and evaluate success.

The US Forest Service, along with agencies at the Department of the Interior and state wildlife agencies, work well together through a variety of interagency committees and processes to monitor the health of wildlife and habitat (including migration corridors) in the area covered by the Bill. Title V of H.R. 980 requires the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to establish an additional interagency team to work on these same issues. We feel we can accomplish this objective using existing interagency efforts.

H.R. 980 creates new categories of land management (i.e., biological connecting corridors and special corridor management areas). Without further and substantial examination by the agency, we cannot determine whether the land areas identified in H.R. 980 will meet the management and recovery goals for threatened, endangered and other species. In addition, based on an understanding of forest dynamics and wildlife habitat, we feel that excluding management activities from such a vast area in the Northern Rockies would not necessarily benefit many key species. For example, Ponderosa pine forests are adapted to frequent low-intensity fires but decades of fire exclusion have lead to higher fuel loadings and uncharacteristic wildfire (Cooper 1960, Swetnam 1990)). As a consequence of fuel loadings and continuity of fuels, fires are both larger and substantially hotter than expected for this ecosystem (Arno and Brown 1991). Negative consequences can often occur for fish (Burton 2005), and wildlife (McCallum 1994). Management of certain stands in this region, such as the approach outlined for Northern goshawk in the southwestern United States, can return forests to a sustainable condition where fire would again play its characteristic role (Reynolds et al 1992). Thus, this bill may prevent us from reducing the risk of stand replacing fires where that approach is the appropriate one.

In general, there is ongoing state-by-state work already being accomplished to achieve many of the objectives of H.R. 980. We have testified in support of numerous specific Wilderness Area and Wild and Scenic River designations before Congress. Our planning process includes criteria for evaluating National Forest System lands for recommendation to Congress as wilderness and for identifying areas for specific management emphasis, such as for restoration and recovery, or habitat connectivity. Our collaborative planning process involves all interested parties who assist us in finding solutions to competing demands for natural resources.

We have additional concerns:

- Reducing the accumulation of forest fuels. Decades of fire suppression have led to overstocked, fire-prone forests. Without the ability to thin the National Forests, especially those in close proximity to rural communities, we will not be able to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire to and for those communities. In addition, stand-replacing fires eliminate important wildlife habitat for years as well as contribute major amounts of carbon to the atmosphere.
- Energy transmission and development. These activities are not addressed in H.R. 980. Energy corridors identified in the “West-wide Energy Corridor Plan” are proposed for this area and would likely be impacted by this bill.
- Allocation of Resources. Implementing titles II, IV, and V of H.R. 980 would require a shift in management of our National Forests, redirecting Forest Service funding to the Northern Rockies at the expense of other Regions whose ecosystems are just as biologically diverse and important to the nation. Also, surveying new administrative

boundaries for areas that would be designated as wilderness, developing wild and scenic river plans and the restoration activities described in the bill would cost millions of dollars.

- Private Inholdings. There would be challenges in working with owners of private inholdings regarding access, development, and use of the adjoining wilderness.

We believe our planning process is working towards many of the same benefits identified in this bill. Our Forest planning teams consider the broader region including wildlife movement, in their analyses. We develop the plans on a forest-by-forest or state-by-state basis. As part of that planning we encourage the participation of local, regional and national constituents prior to the agency making a recommendation or decision. When the public has the opportunity to be heard and we understand their concerns, the agency makes better recommendations and those decisions are more easily implemented and enforced. We encourage those who are involved in supporting this bill to work with us to protect and sustain the National Forests of the northern Rockies and the important habitat they provide as we develop and implement our Forest and project plans. Again, we greatly appreciate their efforts and look forward to working with them as we move forward in managing and protecting these magnificent forests.

This concludes my prepared statement and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.