

**Before the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public
Lands**

Statement on HR 980

The Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act

May 5, 2009

By the Rev. Dean Stewart

Thank you, Chairman Grijalva and members of the subcommittee, for this hearing on HR 980, the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act (NREPA). Thank you for your commitment to and responsible care for these national treasures.

Almost 13 years ago I moved with my wife to the Inland Northwest region of the US from Chicago, to Moscow, Idaho where I still serve as a parish pastor. As we had before in the East and Midwest, we expected to enjoy the forests and the wilderness areas out here and to spend as much time as possible backpacking, camping, and hiking. We did that, and we continue to do so.

What I had not really anticipated until I was out here was the drama and the fight for the survival of the diverse, beautiful and rich ecosystems. I came from Illinois and Ohio—places where that fight had been fought and lost long ago, for the most part, and without much opposition. Back then, people wrote off that loss as “progress.” They also wrote off—as irrelevant or worse—those who had worked and fought hard for the integrity of wildlands, but who ultimately lost that struggle. It is different out here, now, as encroachment continues into the very last remaining intact wilderness areas in all of the lower 48 states. The stakes rise as the treasure recedes.

It is one thing, and not a good thing, to plow through lands, rivers, forests and streams as if there is no end to them. It is indefensible to plow through the precarious remaining successful and sustainable wild ecosystems, leaving degraded waterways, blighted forests, species left unprotected and simply nowhere else for them to go for survival.

Within months of our arrival in Moscow, my wife and I began to meet dedicated, clever, serious, variously informed, unanimously determined people engaged in the struggle. Some were loggers and some camped in the trees resisting. Some were in jail and some were putting those others there. Some had been at it for decades and others dropped out of high school to join the fray. The sides continually traded victories and setbacks.

The economy and declining profitability in the extractive industries created a milder kind of peace in the forest, and now there seems to be a window of opportunity for all. It has been a long time since there has been as much consensus and hope regarding the future of

our threatened wildlands and rivers. Jobs are needed and jobs can be available through NREPA and the National Wildland Recovery Corps. Road removal, slope stabilization, eradication of invasive species, re-introduction of native seeding plants and removal of fish barriers (culverts) are needed in 9 specific areas (one million acres), enough for 2300 jobs over a 10-20 year recovery period. The ecosystem can be allowed to thrive along with the local economies.

There is an ethical urgency to care for these wild treasures while we can also responsibly care for families, towns and jobs. And healthy forests continue to be healthy engines for stable economies and stable communities.

In the meantime, with the effects of permanent climate change, there need to be protections made ready for migration corridors north and south, and between upper and lower elevations for bears, moose, elk, deer, wolves. Streams and rivers need to be protected from silting and landslides, and remediation for the invasive effects of extractive processes.

Larry Rassmussen of Union Theological Seminary in New York has reminded us of the extraordinary works of the great generation of builders, clearers of land, dam construction engineers. He calls on us to be ready for the great works of this generation to modify some of the great works of previous ones. At a meeting in Lewiston, Idaho, close to the dams on the Lower Snake River, a strong advocate of keeping, not breaching the dams, told me, even so, "if we knew then what we know now, we would have never built those dams." It's just that their removal, even if ultimately beneficial for the migration of salmon and steelhead, would require a huge transition from hydro-power and river transport of grains. Doable, likely beneficial, but not easy. It takes a great generation.

Augustine of Hippo, 4th century saint and famously late convert, is supposed to have prayed during his more profligate days, "Lord, give me chastity and constancy, but not yet." The days are running out and moving fast for our conversion to be of any consequence for the survivability of the Northern Rockies Ecosystem, but there is time right now for us to make the reasonable restraints and oversight that NREPA would employ.

HR 980 has been around for years, under differently numbered resolutions. This is our chance to be the voice of the voiceless ones, the ones whose survival depends on our resolve to be the caretakers of creation that we're called to be in Genesis. Even though Genesis calls us to "subdue the earth," we might just notice that we are the ones of the earth that currently need the most subduing and limiting. And I believe that NREPA takes this human dilemma to heart, seeks to rein in our old habits and appetites, and redirects them toward healthier alternatives. We have always believed that God is pro-sustainability toward earth. There couldn't be a much better time than now to show God we couldn't agree more.