

Testimony of
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on HR 980, Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act
Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands of the
House Natural Resources Committee
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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of Wilderness Watch and our members throughout the northern Rockies and across America in support of H.R. 980, the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act (NREPA).

I want to thank the sponsors of the bill, especially Congresswomen Maloney, Chairman Rahall, and Chairman Grijalva. I know I speak for many of us who live in the Northern Rockies when I say that we are deeply grateful for your efforts and leadership to protect our wildlands.

I'm sure you've heard from some in the region, perhaps even from some of our elected officials, that you should butt-out of Northern Rockies affairs—even though the lands belong as much to you and your constituents as they do to my neighbors and me. I think it's important to remember that few of our nation's landmark conservation achievements were initiated by or initially supported by local officials. Whether it was the establishment of Yellowstone, Glacier or Grand Teton national parks; setting aside most of the national forests; passing the 1980 Alaska lands bill (ANILCA), which set aside more than 100-million-acres of wilderness, parks, and refuges in that State; or even creating many of the national monuments that make up the new National Landscape Conservation System—local officials and some vocal residents lined up on the wrong side of those efforts. But today, citizens in those same cities and towns are grateful that so-called “outsiders” had the foresight and fortitude to step up and protect these places. NREPA, too, will follow this well-worn trail.

NREPA is an extraordinary bill; visionary, homegrown, and based on the best available science. It was written by citizens of the region, with the aid of preeminent ecologists and biologists, such as pioneer grizzly bear researchers John Craighead and Charles Jonkel, who

understand that NREPA and grizzly conservation are synonymous. The grizzly is an “umbrella” species in the Northern Rockies. Save the grizzly’s habitat, and you’ve saved the ecosystem for almost everything else. Grizzlies need large, protected core areas linked by movement and dispersal corridors. NREPA was built with the grizzly and other wildlife foremost in mind.

Above all, NREPA represents our last best chance in the lower 48 to preserve some semblance of what America was before Euro-Americans went to work changing it. There’s a lot of great Wilderness around the country, but nowhere else has retained the ecological integrity or wildness of the Northern Rockies. It is the epitome of what the late-Wallace Stegner described as the wilderness “against which our character as a people was formed.”

NREPA would designate 23 million acres of Wilderness across five states. That’s a lot of land. But let’s put it into perspective. Since the last acre of national forest was designated as Wilderness in Montana, Idaho, or Wyoming, California alone has added more than 11 million acres to the Wilderness System.

That’s nearly one-half of NREPA! And in just one State!

Equally important, NREPA does Wilderness designation right. The management provisions in the bill hold true to the Wilderness Act. Unlike some recent bills that have sought to weaken the provisions of the Wilderness Act, what it means for any area to be “Wilderness,” NREPA holds fast to the ideals of the original law, preserving authentic Wilderness that adheres to standards that make Wilderness unique among our public lands.

NREPA does more than protect our Wilderness, though that alone should be enough. NREPA protects our way of life. People live in Montana and they flock to the Northern Rockies because of our wildlands and the opportunity to hike, fish, camp and hunt in wild, unspoiled country. And contrary to what some want you to believe, these wildlands are also sustaining and shaping our economy. I’m not here to promote economic development, and in my opinion we sure don’t need more people moving to my neck of the woods, but the facts are

what they are. Last week, an article in our local newspaper, the *Missoulian*, described a presentation by Larry Swanson, a well-known Montana economist, who shared his research with a group of 400-some community leaders and business owners:

“Most of the 1990s, we thought the economy was declining,” Swanson said, “but it wasn’t. It was changing.” Jobs in the natural resource industry declined; yet as the vanguard economy struggled, Missoula’s income levels per household climbed, employment grew and unemployment dropped....What it all adds up to is this: Despite a grim outlook elsewhere in the country, economic expansion is happening in small and mid-size cities in nice areas that have a lot of outdoor recreation opportunities....“So much value is placed on open spaces by the people who live here.” Swanson said. “Cities not tied into these amenities are not growing.”

How can you go wrong with a bill that saves nature, preserves our way of life, and sustains our local economies? NREPA does all of that. Americans want change, and that includes how we treat our environment and our public lands. We simply can’t continue to let provincialism and shortsightedness dictate what happens to our national treasures, nor condemn our children and grandchildren to a biologically and aesthetically impoverished world.

NREPA is our last, best chance to save what is truly unique and valuable about the Northern Rockies. I urge you to lend it your utmost support.

Thank you.

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