



Testimony of Congressman Denny Rehberg (MT-At Large)
Opposing the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act
Tuesday, May 05, 2009
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands



Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop, thanks for allowing me to return to the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands to testify again on behalf of the people of Montana.

I'm here representing county commissioners, state representatives, ranchers, timber workers, sportsmen and women and recreationalists who have expressed their opposition to the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act in letters, faxes, emails, survey responses and even a rapidly growing Facebook group. All told, I've heard from almost 10,000 folks who live, work and raise families in the Northern Rockies.

I can report that more than 96% of those who contacted me oppose this bill.

The land NREPA affects is represented by only 7 Members of Congress including myself; far fewer than the 72 current cosponsors of the bill. It's telling, however, that none of those 72 cosponsors are from the districts that NREPA impacts.

This bill carves out more than 24 million acres of new wilderness. That area is larger than any of the districts represented by any of the 72 cosponsors of the bill. Representative Carolyn Maloney – who is the lead sponsor of this bill – could fit her New York district into the new wilderness created by NREPA almost 3,000 times.

And while you may have the votes to force your will on the people who live in the Northern Rockies, I'm here to tell you that doing so isn't in anyone's best interest. Not the folks who live on this land, and not the people you were elected to represent. It's not even in the best interest of the ecosystems we all want to protect.

Let me be absolutely clear. The folks I represent support responsible land conservation. Currently, there are more than 30 million acres of state and federal land in Montana alone - that's nearly one acre in every three. As a state where lifestyles and livelihoods depend on the land we live on, it's one of our top priorities. And we do an outstanding job.

To manage these lands, stake-holders come to the table to formulate consensus-driven solutions at the local level. The federal government could learn a lot from our solutions that center around three words: cooperation, trust and consensus.

For the Montanans who work, till, graze, hunt, fish, hike, camp and enjoy this land, conservation is not only a daily personal choice; it's our way of life. Real conservation isn't about making tough decisions for someone else who lives thousands of miles away, yet that's exactly what NREPA does.

The workable solutions we need won't come from Washington, D.C.; we need to reach a balance that truly reflects Montana, not the ideals of powerful special interests.

From Washington, D.C., it's impossible to smell the smoke from hundreds of raging wildfires that will be harder to fight if NREPA passes.

From Washington, D.C., it's impossible to see the 1.6 million-plus acres of dead and dying trees that result from pine beetle infestations that will be more difficult to manage if NREPA passes.

From Washington, D.C., you can't watch a hillside change colors as indigenous plants are slowly strangled out of existence by toxic weeds that are impossible to fight once NREPA passes.

From Washington, D.C., you can't hear the frustration in the voice of a hunter or angler who can no longer get to the secluded mountain ridge where his family has gone for generations once NREPA passes.

From Washington, D.C., Congress pushes for alternative energy from wind and the sun. But how can we get that power, and create green jobs in the process, if you effectively set up a barrier that cannot be crossed?

And there's a new concern looming in the minds of the folks around Montana and the country. There aren't many things we in the Northern Rockies care more about than their Second Amendment rights. Bills like NREPA create more stringent federal controls on the land under consideration, but they don't guarantee Second Amendment rights on that land. I'm concerned that NREPA has no guarantees that the federal government won't someday ban firearms on these new wilderness areas the way it just did in National Parks.

At the end of the day, this is about Washington, D.C. thinking it knows how to manage the Northern Rockies better than the people who live there. I'm here to say this isn't the case.

Many of Representative Maloney's constituents in New York's 14th District undoubtedly find Central Park a welcome refuge from the urban surroundings of America's most crowded city. A Montanan who visited Central Park recently shared an observation with me: Although Central Park was free of buildings and cars, many of the open spaces were cordoned off by fences. Visitors could walk or run on the pathways, but the fields of grass around them were off limits. NREPA models its philosophy for 24 million acres of land after the approach taken in the 843 acres of Central Park. Look, but don't touch.

This approach may work in Manhattan, New York, but it doesn't work in Manhattan, Montana. That's why I oppose this bill.