

**Statement of
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House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
H.R. 1975, Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act
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Thank you for inviting me to testify on H.R. 1975, the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act (NREPA). We believe that this broad brush approach to wilderness designation lacks the local input and consensus-building that were essential ingredients in previous wilderness bills supported by this Administration. Consequently, the Department of the Interior opposes H.R. 1975.

H.R. 1975 is a wide-ranging bill that, according to its sponsors, designates approximately 23 million acres of land as wilderness and as biological corridors. The bill also designates wild and scenic rivers. It proposes such designations on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the National Park Service, and the U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service) in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. While the impact of the bill is potentially vast, it is difficult to find specific information on the areas proposed for designation. We have only been able to find a single overview map of the areas with no exact details on the boundaries of the parcels proposed for designation.

From the overview map, in areas either wholly or partially managed by the BLM, the bill appears to designate 40 wilderness areas, two wild and scenic rivers, as well as 22 biological corridors, a new concept with which we have some concerns as described later in the testimony. It also appears to designate wilderness areas in three national parks - Glacier National Park, Yellowstone National Park, and Grand Teton National Park. The areas appear to be the same as those previously studied, found suitable, and recommended for wilderness designation in the 1970's. The vast majority of lands proposed for designation under H.R. 1975 are managed by the Forest Service. We defer to Forest Service on these provisions in the bill.

This Administration has supported a number of wilderness bills that the Congress has passed. During the 109th Congress alone, over half a million acres of wilderness have been designated on BLM-managed lands in California, Utah and Nevada. We supported the efforts of delegations in those states to reach legislative solutions by working toward consensus and compromise through local, state, and Federal input that takes into consideration the needs and concerns of the various stakeholders and interest groups that are impacted by wilderness designation.

H.R. 1975 does not show the same spirit of consensus and compromise that has resulted in previously successful wilderness bills. It is not the result of a local collaborative effort undertaken by the Congressional delegations of the affected states. Those proposals that have reached fruition over the last decade have been more limited in scope, spanning a county, a Congressional District, or a single wilderness area. We believe a collaborative process is essential for success.

We also are extremely concerned that H.R. 1975 introduces a new concept of designating biological connecting corridors as units of the National Wilderness Preservation System, as well as special corridor management areas with wilderness-like management. These provisions would introduce a significant new element to designations under the 1964 Wilderness Act, and we would be cautious about such a revision without more considered debate. Moreover, we are unclear as to the need for this new designation. Where protections are necessary for wildlife corridors, we recommend using existing designations and administrative tools, rather than creating a novel designation whose scope and interpretation are as yet unclear.

We support the resolution of wilderness designations throughout the West. Some of the areas proposed for designation could bring about a consensus, and we are generally aware that there are some areas included in the bill (depending on specific boundaries) that we could support. At the same time, we understand that other proposed designations would result in resource conflicts or pose serious management challenges. For example, it appears that oil and gas production currently exists on some of the BLM-managed lands proposed for wilderness designation under H.R. 1975, and well-used vehicle corridors crisscross others.

While only Congress can determine whether to designate Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) as wilderness or release them for other multiple uses, we support the resolution of WSA issues and stand ready to work with Members of Congress toward solutions. There are currently a number of efforts throughout the West by Members of Congress working collaboratively with local and national interests to reach consensus on wilderness proposals. We will continue to support this approach. Unfortunately, H.R. 1975 does not meet this basic test and, therefore, the Department opposes its enactment.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I will be happy to answer any questions.