

**Statement of
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Bureau of Land Management
Department of the Interior
Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
S. 1470, Forest Jobs and Recreation Act
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Thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior to testify on S. 1470, the Forest Jobs and Recreation Act of 2009. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) generally supports the wilderness designations included in S. 1470 on BLM-managed lands. We would like the opportunity to work with the Sponsor and the Committee on boundary modifications and management language clarifications.

The vast majority of the designations and other substantive provisions of S. 1470 apply to activities on National Forest System lands. We defer to the Department of Agriculture on those provisions.

Background

The southwestern corner of Montana is a critically important biological region. Linking the Greater Yellowstone Area and the Bitterroot Mountains of Idaho and Montana, these areas include important wildlife corridors that allow natural migrations of wildlife and help prevent species isolation. The Centennial Mountains are particularly noteworthy in this regard. The diversity of wildlife throughout this area is a strong indicator of its importance. Elk, mule deer, bighorn sheep, and moose, as well as their predators, such as bears, mountain lions and wolves, travel through this corner of Montana.

Outstanding dispersed recreational opportunities abound in this region as well. A day's hunting, hiking or fishing may be pursued in the splendid isolation of the steeply forested Ruby Mountains or in the foothill prairies of the Blacktail Mountains, areas largely untouched and pristine. For the more adventurous, Humbug Spires offers 65 million year-old rocks now eroded into fanciful spires, appreciated both for their climbing challenges as well as their scientific value.

S. 1470

Title I of S. 1470, "Stewardship and Restoration" applies solely to National Forest System Lands. Accordingly the Department of the Interior defers to the Department of Agriculture on those provisions. The majority of the designations in Title II of the bill, "Designation of Wilderness and National Recreation Areas," are also on National Forest System Lands, and again we defer to the Department of Agriculture. We concur with many of the concerns raised by the Department of Agriculture in their testimony about nonstandard language and exceptions to the 1964 Wilderness Act.

Sections 201(d) and (e) of S. 1470 designate five wilderness areas on lands administered by the BLM in southwestern Montana: the Blacktail Mountains Wilderness (10,670 acres), Centennial Mountains Wilderness (23,250 acres), Farlin Creek Wilderness (660 acres), Humbug Spires Wilderness (8,900 acres), and Ruby Mountains Wilderness (15,500 acres). The BLM supports

these designations. All of these areas meet the definitions of wilderness in that they are areas where the land and its community of life are untrammled. These areas have retained their primeval character and have been influenced primarily by the forces of nature, with outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation or solitude.

The BLM would like the opportunity to discuss several possible boundary modifications with the Sponsor and the Committee. For example, boundary modifications to the proposed Humbug Spires, Ruby Mountains, and Centennial Mountains Wilderness areas could improve manageability by providing more clearly definable boundaries for both the public and Federal land managers. In addition, boundary changes to the proposed Centennial Mountains Wilderness could help protect this critically important corridor as a single coherent whole, thereby protecting the genetic diversity of the fauna inhabiting the Greater Yellowstone Area and the Bitterroot Range. In the case of the proposed 660-acre Farlin Creek Wilderness, the BLM recommends transferring the administrative jurisdiction of this small area to the Forest Service and including it in the adjoining 77,000 acre East Pioneers Wilderness Area.

Section 203 of S. 1470 proposes to fully release five BLM-managed wilderness study areas (WSAs) in Beaverhead and Madison counties from WSA restrictions thereby allowing a full range of multiple uses. In addition, five other WSAs would be partially released from WSA status and partially designated wilderness, as noted above. In all, over 74,000 acres of WSAs are proposed for release, while nearly 59,000 acres are proposed for wilderness designation; we support these provisions. In addition we recommend the addition of the East Fork Blacktail WSA as wilderness.

The 6,100-acre East Fork Blacktail WSA is among the areas proposed for release by S. 1470. The BLM believes that designation of most of this area merits consideration as wilderness. It is bordered on two of its three sides by the proposed Forest Service Snowcrest Wilderness Area, and the third side abuts the Robb-Ledford Game Range managed by the State of Montana. One option would be to release approximately 40 acres to accommodate an existing road leading to a camping area, while designating the remainder as wilderness. Designation would protect the west flank of the Snowcrest Range, better provide for high-quality primitive hunting opportunities, and help ensure consistent management.

Finally, the wilderness management language in section 202 includes some anomalies that we believe are unintended and could lead to confusion. For example, section 202(j)(2)(B) could be misinterpreted to allow motorized access to areas designated as wilderness—which would be inconsistent with the 1964 Wilderness Act. We would like the opportunity to work with the Sponsor and the Committee to ensure that the bill's provisions are consistent with the 1964 Wilderness Act.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We look forward to working cooperatively with the Congress to designate these special and biologically significant areas in this dramatic corner of Montana as wilderness.