

**Statement of
Karen Mouritsen
Deputy Assistant Director, Energy, Minerals and Realty Management
Bureau of Land Management, Department of the Interior
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands**

**H.R. 1138, Sawtooth National Recreation Area and Jerry Peak Wilderness Additions Act
June 16, 2015**

Thank you for the invitation to testify on H.R. 1138, Sawtooth National Recreation Area and Jerry Peak Wilderness Additions Act. The Department of the Interior supports H.R. 1138 as it applies to lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and would like the opportunity to work with the sponsor and the Committee on technical modifications to the legislation and minor boundary modifications to improve manageability. We defer to the Department of Agriculture regarding provisions of H.R. 1138 which apply to National Forest System Lands.

Background

The Boulder-White Clouds area of central Idaho captivates the imagination with crystal lakes, high mountain backcountry, and abundant wildlife. Hunters, hikers, ranchers and other stakeholders have come together to support preservation of these unique and treasured lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service (FS) and the BLM.

The lands managed by the BLM in this region represent diverse ecosystems ranging from lower elevation sagebrush and grasses to lodgepole and limber pine at the higher elevations. There are large forested areas in the upper reaches of Bear, Mosquito, Sage, and Lake Creek drainages. The highest point is Jerry Peak at over 10,000 feet where there are spectacular vistas of the surrounding mountain ranges. Herd Lake, at over 7,000 feet, is a small blue gem within the steep rocky terrain. From the small Herd Lake campsite visitors can hike the trail along the creek to Herd Lake. The shores of the lake have scattered pines and there are wonderful opportunities to fish for rainbow trout.

This varied and magnificent terrain provides habitat for wildlife, including deer, elk, black bear, mountain lion, bighorn sheep, and antelope. Coyotes and golden eagles are also common. The area is attractive to hunters and a significant portion of the yearly visitation occurs during hunting season.

H.R. 1138

H.R. 1138 is the result of many years of collaborative efforts by the Idaho Congressional delegation. Their dedication to resolving public land use issues in central Idaho is commendable. Title I of the bill designates three new wilderness areas – Jim McClure-Jerry Peak Wilderness (approximately 117,000 acres), White Clouds Wilderness (approximately 91,000 acres), and Hemingway-Boulders Wilderness (approximately 68,000 acres) and contains provisions related to their administration. Approximately 24,000 acres of the proposed Jerry Peak Wilderness are managed by the BLM, along with approximately 450 acres of the proposed White Clouds Wilderness. The FS manages the other federal lands within the proposed wilderness areas. The

Department of the Interior supports the proposed wilderness designations on lands managed by the BLM and welcomes the opportunity to work with the sponsor and the Committee on minor boundary modifications to the Jerry Peak Wilderness to improve manageability. We would also like to recommend minor modifications to management language to be consistent with usual wilderness management language. Section 108 releases nearly 80,000 acres of BLM-managed lands in four wilderness study areas (WSAs) from WSA restrictions.

Livestock grazing on the public lands designated as wilderness, and in the surrounding area, is addressed in section 102(e) of the bill. The BLM supports this standard language on the management of livestock grazing on public lands within designated wilderness. Section 102(e) also establishes the “Boulder White Clouds Grazing Area” on nearly 770,000 acres of public lands administered by the FS and BLM – surrounding and including the three areas designated as wilderness. Under the provisions of this section, ranchers with Federal grazing permits or leases within this area may choose to voluntarily donate their permits or leases to the Secretary of Agriculture or Interior. The Secretaries are required to accept these donations, and to permanently terminate all grazing on the land covered by the permit or lease. Partial donation and congruent partial termination of grazing is also provided for under this subsection. Grazing can be a compatible use within wilderness, and there is a long history of legislation accommodating grazing within wilderness designations. However, we also recognize and support the proposal by the Idaho delegation to allow voluntary and permanent reductions in grazing in these unique and environmentally sensitive areas.

Title II of H.R. 1138 provides for the conveyance, at no cost, of 12 small tracts of public lands to local governments for public purposes. The BLM generally supports the conveyances of nine individual parcels of BLM-administered lands to local governments, but notes that some of the parcels to be conveyed contain habitat for the Greater Sage-Grouse. We appreciate the sponsor’s willingness to work with us on modifications to some of the conveyances to minimize impacts to Greater Sage-Grouse habitat. We defer to the FS regarding three conveyances of National Forest System lands. As provided in the bill, each of the conveyances of lands managed by the BLM would be for uses consistent with public purposes allowed under the R&PP Act, which authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to lease or convey public lands at nominal cost for recreational and public purposes, including parks and other facilities benefiting the public. In general, the BLM supports appropriate legislative conveyances if the lands are to be used for purposes consistent with the Recreation and Public Purposes (R&PP) Act, if the conveyance includes a reversionary clause to enforce this requirement, and if the benefitting local government is responsible for the administrative costs of the conveyance.

Among the proposed conveyances of BLM-administered public lands are 10 acres for a fire hall, 80 acres for a waste transfer site to Custer County, and 23 acres to the city of Clayton for a cemetery. The BLM has reviewed each of these conveyances in the bill. We believe they are in the public interest, and support their no-cost conveyance for uses that would be allowed under the R&PP Act if the bill is amended to provide that the receiving parties cover the costs of the conveyances, including any needed surveys and the preparation of conveyance documents.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 1138. We applaud the work of the Idaho delegation, and the vision and commitment of the bill's sponsor, Congressman Mike Simpson, who has championed the effort to protect these unique landscapes in Idaho for over a decade in partnership with his colleagues in the Senate.

We look forward to working with Members of the Idaho delegation and the Committee to make further, minor modifications to the bill to permanently protect these important landscapes as a part of the National Wilderness Preservation System and to affect the land transfers directed in the bill to provide specific public benefits to local communities.