

**Statement of
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Department of the Interior
Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
S. 268, Forest Jobs and Recreation Act
May 25, 2011**

Thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior to testify on S. 268, the Forest Jobs and Recreation Act of 2011. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) supports the wilderness designations on BLM-managed lands included in S. 268.

The vast majority of the designations and other substantive provisions of S. 268 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. 268

Title I of S. 268, 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 are also on National Forest System Lands, and again we defer to the Department of Agriculture.

Section 203(b) of S. 268 designates five wilderness areas on lands administered by the BLM in southwestern Montana: the Blacktail Mountains Wilderness (10,675 acres), Centennial Mountains Wilderness (23,700 acres), Humbug Spires Wilderness (8,900 acres), East Fork Blacktail Wilderness (6,125 acres), and Ruby Mountains Wilderness (16,300 acres). The BLM supports these designations and we appreciate the Sponsor and the Committee working with us over the last year to refine these boundaries. 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. We continue to encourage the Sponsor and the Committee to consider expanding the boundaries of the Centennial Mountains Wilderness in order to protect this area as a single coherent corridor, thereby providing enhanced benefit for the genetic diversity of the fauna inhabiting the Greater Yellowstone Area and the Bitterroot Range.

Furthermore, we support the transfer of administrative jurisdiction over the 660-acre Farlin Creek area to the Forest Service for inclusion in the adjoining 77,000 acre East Pioneers Wilderness Area.

Section 205 of S. 268 proposes to fully release four BLM-managed wilderness study areas (WSAs) in Beaverhead and Madison counties from WSA management thereby allowing the consideration of a full range of multiple uses. In addition, in five other WSAs, some areas would be released from WSA status and other areas would be partially designated as wilderness, as noted above. In all, over 66,000 acres of WSAs are proposed for release, and nearly 66,000 acres are proposed for wilderness designation; we support these provisions.

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.