

**Statement for the Record
U.S. Department of the Interior**

**House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Federal Lands Legislative Hearing**

H.R. 6788, Montana Sportsmen Conservation Act

H.R. 6788 would release nearly 104,000 acres of public lands managed by the BLM and the USFS from designation as Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs). Under the bill, 22,960 acres of BLM-managed WSAs would be released from management under Section 603 of FLPMA, and 81,000 acres of lands managed by the USFS would be released from management under section 3(a) of the Montana Wilderness Study Act of 1977. The Department supports the bill, and as a matter of policy supports Congressional action to resolve wilderness designation and WSA release issues on public lands across the West.

Analysis

FLPMA provides direction on the retention and management of lands administered by the BLM. Section 603 of FLPMA directed the BLM to first identify areas with wilderness characteristics – this step was completed in 1980. The second step of the process was to study each of the WSAs and make a recommendation to the President on their suitability or non-suitability for preservation as wilderness – this step concluded in 1991. The President was then directed to send wilderness recommendations to Congress within two years of receiving the Secretary of the Interior's recommendation.

The President's 1992 and 1993 wilderness recommendations to Congress are now over 30 years old; and many WSAs are still pending Congressional action. Today, WSAs are managed by the BLM so as not to impair their suitability for designation as wilderness. The Hoodoo Mountain and Wales Creek WSAs were not recommended for wilderness designation in the 1991 recommendation to the President.

H.R. 6788 directs the release of the Hoodoos Mountains and Wales Creek WSAs and directs the BLM to manage these lands in accordance with the applicable land management plans upon release. The Missoula Resource Management Plan directs that upon release the Hoodoo Mountain WSA, nearly 11,400 acres would be managed as part of the adjacent Hoodoos Backcountry Area (BCA). As a BCA, the lands would be used for dispersed wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities, such as hunting and wildlife-viewing, and to restore and enhance wildlife habitat for big game-species. Leasable and mineral materials could be considered on a more case-by-case basis, active forest management practices could be used to address forest health issues, and the use of heavy equipment to suppress wildland fire would be appropriate under more circumstances. Upon release of the Wales Creek WSA, nearly 6,000 acres would be managed as part of the Wales BCA, which would be managed similarly to the Hoodoos Mountains BCA, and the remaining approximately 5,600 acres would be managed as the Wales Creek Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

The Department does not find that wilderness is the best mechanism for managing the resources on these lands. The Missoula Resource Management Plan provides for resource protection, recreation, development, vegetation management, wildland fire, and resource development upon release of the WSAs. H.R. 6788 supports the Administration's recreation, timber production, and energy dominance goals while providing greater flexibility to manage public lands under the principle of multiple use and the Department supports the bill.