



The Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act of 2011 (S. 1087/H.R. 1581)

This bill, introduced by Sen. Barrasso and Rep. McCarthy, aims to reverse the longstanding designation of as much as 60 million acres of pristine wildlife habitat, opening these areas to development. The areas include a substantial portion of the Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) on our National Forests and the Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) throughout our public lands. Bill proponents suggest land management agencies are protecting lands without authority. However, the agencies responsible are not just authorized, but required, to manage these lands for multiple uses, including wildlife habitat, wilderness, recreation and ecosystem services (like clean water). Contrary to popular belief, areas of pristine wilderness are unique even on our public lands – and this bill would strip the agencies of the authority they currently have to protect these special places.



Portions of the "sky islands" on the Coronado National Forest in Arizona, which support unique wildlife and biodiversity, are at risk of losing protection from this bill.

This bill would Strip Inventoried Roadless Area status and protection from as much as 55 million acres of IRAs on our National Forests, putting watersheds and forests at risk, and strip Wilderness Study Area status and protection from 6.7 million acres (more than half) of WSAs currently protected for their wilderness qualities.

The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management are required to protect areas set aside for their wilderness characteristics as "Inventoried Roadless Areas" and "Wilderness Study Areas." IRAs serve as part of the multiple-use planning mission of the Forest Service, allowing uses like high quality watersheds, wildlife habitat and biodiversity preservation to be balanced with more industrial uses elsewhere. WSAs

serve as a pool of high-quality areas from which Congress can select and designate Wilderness Areas for permanent protection, while in the meantime providing key wildlife habitat and unique recreation opportunities that support local economies. This bill would strip protections from any areas that have not yet been recommended for Wilderness Area designation by Congress without gathering new information on the areas to be released and without any input from agency experts or the public.

Prevent future protection of released areas, taking the lands most worthy of conservation and of Wilderness Area designations off the table.

Once IRAs and WSAs are stripped of protection, this bill would go to extremes to prevent any future protection of the released areas. It would prohibit the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior from issuing any type of new policy or order to direct the management of released areas, no matter what the content. It would even overturn the effect of the 2001 Roadless Rule,¹ which established policies for IRAs, and terminate the

¹ Specialized Areas, Roadless Area Conservation, 66 Fed. Reg. 3244 (Jan. 12, 2001).

applicability of the Wildlands Order,² which established a process for recommending new wilderness designations on BLM lands, over areas released by the bill.

These restrictions would be effective in permanently preventing any future designation of these areas as Wilderness, and tie the agencies' hands from providing sound management for the natural characteristics these areas possess. What's worse is that these decisions are based on politics, not science, and will do harm to these unique public resources that agencies are meant to manage and sustain. With the stroke of a pen, this legislation would remove the possibility of future protection for the very lands that have been found to be most worthy of conservation and of Wilderness Area designation.

Take away the best tool the Forest Service has to manage for pristine ecosystems and watersheds.

Inventoried Roadless Areas on our national forests provide a system under which land managers balance multiple uses, allowing for lands with the best natural resource characteristics to be preserved while more industrial uses occur in other, better suited areas. These roadless areas *are not* “de facto wilderness” – in fact off highway vehicles and other activities not allowed in Wilderness Areas are routinely permitted in IRAs.

Take away Congress' right to evaluate WSAs individually and determine whether or not a Wilderness Area designation is appropriate.

Part of the value and purpose of the WSA systems is that it protects wilderness-quality areas that can ultimately be considered for Wilderness Area designation by Congress. We see this process played out in Wilderness Area designation bills that are introduced, debated, and voted on nearly every Congress. Decisions regarding Wilderness Area recommendations have always been made with the understanding that if an area is not included in a request or a bill in the current year that the area in question will still be preserved as a WSA and available for consideration in the future. Very different decisions would have been made if *not recommending* an area would lead to it losing protection, as this bill suggests.



On the Tongass National Forest in Alaska, many of the same areas that local conservation groups have been fighting to save for decades are in danger of losing protection because of this bill.

Instead of focusing on developing smart land management policies that provide balance, this bill would take the most pristine and spectacular pieces of our national heritage and open them up to development, even preventing agencies from providing any new protections in the future. This short-sighted bill would have devastating impacts on the wildlife that take refuge in these protected areas and put at risk some of the last intact ecosystems in our nation.

We urge you to oppose the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act.

² Protecting Wilderness Characteristics on Land Managed by the Bureau of Land Management, Secretarial Order No. 3310 (Dec. 22, 2010).