

**Before the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Statement on HR 1975**

The Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act

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Thank you Chairman Grijalva, and members of the subcommittee for holding this hearing on HR 1975, the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act (NREPA).

The US Northern or Wild Rockies is perhaps the only place in the lower 48 that has retained all of its native species since the arrival of people of European descent. HR 1975 does right by the land because it is based upon science and will serve as a precedent for landscape scale conservation on a bioregional scale. HR 1975 also honors the spirit and intent of the Wilderness Act and upholds the integrity of the National Wilderness Preservation System. This region is the one place in the lower 48 where large-scale, ecosystem conservation is still possible. The reason the area is still relatively intact and wild is because this part of the Rockies is largely public land owned by all Americans.

The Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act's time has come. Citizens' values, biological literacy and political dialogue are finally catching up to the vision embodied in this bill. Two examples illustrate this trend.

The Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act pioneered the idea of recovery and restoration over a decade ago. One of its integral components is Title IV, a wildlands recovery and restoration system. This would restore degraded landscapes through watershed and road removal while creating jobs. An October 4, 2007 article by Michael Moore, a staff writer for the Missoulian, quotes Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer speaking of ecosystem restoration:

"It's in its infancy, but when we can quantify it, people are going to recognize it for the economic force it is."

The article further quotes Governor Schweitzer:

"What's driving this economy," the governor said, "is quality of life. And that's going to drive it for a long time."

The article then addresses a dam removal and cleanup project near Missoula, Montana but also notes:

Watersheds damaged by years of logging and road-building need help, as well.

That is precisely what HR 1975 does—restore watersheds damaged by years of logging and road-building. The Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act's time has come because the time for restoration has come.

The second example of how political dialogue and biological literacy are catching up to HR 1975 grizzlies and habitat connectivity. Since its inception, HR 1975 has pioneered the idea of legislatively protecting biological corridors. In an October 2 article, by Eric Barker the outdoor and environment reporter for the Lewiston Morning Tribune, reports on a grizzly that was recently killed in the Clearwater National Forest in an area that would be protected in HR 1975. DNA work was done on the grizzly, the first “confirmed” grizzly in the expansive Clearwater wildlands in many years. The grizzly apparently was related to those in the Selkirk Mountains well over 100 miles to the north. Barker’s alludes to an Idaho Fish and Game press release about the grizzly:

The press release said the distance travelled underscores the importance of corridors of wildland connecting different populations of grizzly bears play in the effort to recover grizzlies, which are listed as a threatened species in much of the Rocky Mountains.

Again, corridors are a key component of the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act and have been since its inception. Title II in HR 1975 is about biological corridors. These two examples show the timeliness of HR 1975. When first introduced, it was visionary and ahead of its time. With widespread recognition of corridors and restoration as key components of both biological and economic health for the region, the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act time has come.

Though I have been to all of the large ecosystems in the Wild Rockies, the Clearwater region has a special place in my heart. The Wild Clearwater country is the northern half of the largest relatively intact wild ecosystem in the lower 48 state. This larger ecosystem goes by many names including the Greater Salmon-Selway Ecosystem (in HR 1975), Greater Salmon Clearwater, or simply the Big Wild. No place in the lower 48 is there a feeling of big wild country like here. The Clearwater portion of the US Northern Rockies is wetter and--according to a 2001 study by noted conservation biologists Carlos Carroll, Reed Noss and Paul Paquet—is the most important place in the entire Rockies, including Canada, for large carnivores like grizzly bears, wolves and cougars. The rich diversity of the area is remarkable, as recently noted by New York Times writer Timothy Egan in a feature article. Stands of giant ancient cedars, mountain hemlocks, and a variety of rain-loving plants reminds one of the great rainforests of the coast. The fauna of this region is equally diverse, with endemic species including the rare Coeur d’Alene and Idaho giant salamanders. Salmon, steelhead, wolves, wolverine, harlequin ducks, and the great bear—grizzly—are all found here. It is the climate and relatively low elevation that makes the Clearwater biologically unique.

NREPA would protect real places in the Clearwater—large, wild places—that form the core of this most important wildlife habitat. For example, Meadow Creek, a prime addition to the Selway – Bitterroot Wilderness, is important wild steelhead habitat. Even the Forest Service recognized the ecological uniqueness of the meadow systems in this watershed. Several years ago I went with a group of friends, including my nephew from San Diego, on a winter snowshoe backpacking trip in Meadow Creek. We tracked otters who slid over the creek on eight feet of snow. They dug snow tunnels for shelter and to ascend and descend into the stream. Like the otters, we dug snow shelters for protection. My nephew is now a grown man, but I’m certain the self-reliance he learned while being in wild country helped him on his life’s journey.

In September of this year on Weitas Creek, I encountered a black bear, and heard elk bugle and wolves call. I saw wild trout in icy streams in additions to the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. In past years, I have followed elk near the snow line in Big Mallard and Rhett Creeks, climbed Pot Mountain, and saw what appeared to be grizzly tracks in Kelly Creek. All these wild things and wild places are connected, and we to them. The Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act would preserve these wild connections for future generations—future generations of bears; future generations of salmon: and future generations of American citizens, their children and their families.