

*Opening Statement
Subcommittee Chairman Raúl Grijalva
Wild Mon Legislative Hearing
February 26, 2008*

The Subcommittee will come to order.

Today we will be receiving testimony on H.R. 5151, the Wild Monongahela Act. I would like to thank all of our witnesses for being here today and look forward to their testimony.

H.R. 5151, introduced by Chairman Nick Rahall, designates approximately 47,000 acres of National Forest land in West Virginia as wilderness. This includes three additions to existing wilderness areas, and four new wilderness areas.

H.R. 5151 includes some of the wildest and most wonderful areas in the wild and wonderful State of West

Virginia, including critical habitat for various rare and threatened species, key areas for trout and small-mouth bass fishing, majestic plateaus and valleys and excellent opportunities for recreation.

Our full Committee Chairman is to be commended for his fine work on this measure. Chairman Rahall and I share a strong commitment to protecting our nation's truly wild places. Passage of the Wilderness Act, and subsequent statutes, established preservation of wilderness as one of the fundamental purposes of federal land management and one of the most important areas of jurisdiction of this subcommittee.

Those who have worked on wilderness bills know that good wilderness proposals require compromise. Input from the agencies which manage our federal lands is important but the Wilderness Act is clear -- *Congress*

retains sole authority to designate wilderness. In practice, this means that a successful wilderness bill will be a consensus proposal, taking into account input from all relevant stakeholders. The measure before us today is such a proposal.

In considering this and other wilderness bills, we should be careful to understand exactly what wilderness means -- and what it does not mean. For example, there are those who claim wilderness designations somehow conflict with the multiple use mandate of the National Forest System. In truth, wilderness is a multiple use resource -- a fact Congress affirmed in the Wilderness Act and the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act. Uses in wilderness include wildlife and watershed protection, hunting, fishing, recreation, grazing, and even mining, under certain circumstances.

Another misconception is that wilderness somehow hinders fire management. The fact is, the Wilderness Act could not be more clear: “Federal agencies may take such measures as may be necessary in the control of fire, insects, and diseases.” Federal agencies are allowed to use airplanes, helicopters, bulldozers, fire trucks, chain saws and any other equipment they need to fight fires OR to manage flammable vegetation. Fire is not a valid excuse for failing to designate wilderness.

In the end, wilderness is not defined by the absence of certain activities but rather by the *presence* of certain unique and invaluable characteristics. The answer to the often-asked question, “why do you want this area to be wilderness?” is, these areas *already are* wilderness, we simply want to preserve them as they are and as they have been for generations.

I'd now like to turn to Ranking Member Bishop for any opening statement he may have.

I'd now like to recognize Chairman Nick Rahall, the sponsor of this bill, for any statement he may have.