



FEDERAL FOREST RESOURCE COALITION

Policy Position

Wilderness Designations on Federal Forests

2014 is the 50th Anniversary of the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

Background

Wilderness may only be designated by an act of Congress. The Wilderness Act defines wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” There are over 109 million acres of designated wilderness in the United States, 57 million of which are in Alaska. There are 439 wilderness areas on the National Forest System, covering 36 million acres – or almost 19 percent – of the National Forest System. National Forest wilderness areas make up 58 percent of all wilderness acres in the lower 48.

These wilderness areas are part of an impressive system of conservation lands managed by the Federal government. There are 84 million acres of National Parks, including over 2 million acres of proclaimed national monuments (almost half the National Park System is designated wilderness). There are 150 million acres of National Wildlife Refuges (over 28 percent of the Refuge system is designated wilderness). There are over 245 million acres of public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

For the most part, these lands are off limits to permanent development or land use change. Extensive public involvement and strict environmental review are required before any type of intensive land use can take place. As result, the Federal lands of the United States provide a unique conservation legacy which provides opportunities for outdoor recreation and resource use found no where else on earth. Wilderness is the most restrictive land use designation on Federal land. Together with roadless areas, more than half the National Forest System is off limits to most resource use, development, or other intensive land management.

Congress has not sent any Wilderness bills to the President since 2009. However, dozens of Wilderness bills, including 22 bi-partisan wilderness bills, have been introduced in the House and Senate. Many of these bills have been crafted with the support of public lands users, including wilderness proposals in Oregon, Montana, Idaho, and Utah. At least 1.8 million acres of proposed wilderness is covered by bills sponsored by the members of Congress or Senators whose districts or states include those areas. Some bills include guarantees for land management on acres outside of the proposed wilderness.

FFRC Policy Recommendations

FFRC members have advocated for wilderness areas and have worked at the local level to identify lands worthy of wilderness designation. We also live close to and recreate in wilderness areas. We view the current wilderness system as a legitimate and valuable land use on the National Forest System and Bureau of Land Management lands.

FFRC believes that future designations of wilderness on the National Forest System and BLM lands should meet several important criteria.

First, any proposed wilderness areas should meet the wilderness criteria in the Wilderness Act. The Forest Service should not propose, and Congress should not consider, designation of isolated tracts, oddly shaped sections, or areas if designation would hinder access to private lands or federal forest areas which require active management. Further, the Forest Service must not propose wilderness areas in Alaska in violation of the provisions of the Alaska National Interest Land Conservation Act.

Second, wilderness areas should not be designated on the 28 percent of the National Forest System designated in current forest plans as suitable for timber production. These important lands are in need of active management to support local wood using industries, and to help improve overall forest health and ecological integrity. There is a need for more management, not less, on these acres.

Third, at a minimum, Congress should only act on wilderness proposals that have the full support of both the local Congressional delegation and both of the States Senators. While approximate, this level of support ensures accountability and local support for the most restrictive land use designation provided by law.

Fourth, and most importantly, FFRC will only support wilderness designations in the context of comprehensive reforms on a portion of the National Forest System and BLM timberlands. These reforms must:

- Allow the use of expedited NEPA processes to analyze land management projects on acres designated in current forest plans as suited for timber production;
- Require expedited objections and judicial review for projects on acres designated as suited for timber production; and
- Establish timber production as the objective of land management on these acres, directing the courts to interpret other statutory requirements as subsidiary to this objective.

By combining substantial wilderness designation with clarification of the agency's mission on a portion of the National Forest System, a large conservation win is possible which also stimulates rural economies, reduces litigation, and improves the health of our Federal Forests. However, without considerable streamlining and clarity of the timber management mission, FFRC will oppose further wilderness designations.