

For Feb 7th meeting

Place in correspondence

Glenda Wiles

From: Doug Lorain <douglorain@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, January 31, 2018 10:15 AM
To: Glenda Wiles
Cc: Greg Chilcott; Ray Hawk; Jeff Burrows; Doug Schallenberger
Subject: WSA public hearing and thank you

Ravalli County Commissioners:

My name is Doug Lorain, I live in Hamilton, and I was one of the signatories and a point person on a recent letter designed to have the county commission gather greater public comment on their position regarding the bill Senator Daines has introduced on Wilderness Study Areas, including those in Ravalli County. I am writing this comment letter because, very unfortunately, I am unable to attend this meeting due to a long-standing engagement in California in early February. Given my previously expressed interest, however, I did not want to let this opportunity go by without adding my own comments.

First and foremost, I strongly commend the commissioners on their willingness to hold an additional and better-publicized hearing so a larger cross section of Ravalli County residents can express their concerns about this very important issue. This step alone speaks well of the commission and is greatly appreciated.

Second, on the substance of the issue, I would contend that the position taken by the county in its letter of September 15, 2017 is, unfortunately, counterproductive and there is a much better approach available.

As the author of numerous hiking and backpacking guidebooks, I have had the good fortune to hike and explore throughout Montana and am probably one of only a relatively small number of people who has explored (often extensively) in all of the WSAs directly impacted by Senator Daines' bill as well as many dozens of other WSAs and undesignated wild areas. I can personally attest that each of these areas is unique to an extent that they simply do not lend themselves well to a top-down let's-just-release-them-already approach. And while I am an advocate of more protections (including designated wilderness) for certain of our public lands, I *do not* believe that all of the WSAs in our state (or even those in Ravalli County) should be set aside as wilderness. Although certain areas clearly deserve wilderness protections (such as the spectacular and very popular lower reaches of Blodgett Canyon and western parts of the Blue Joint area, which should be made an important addition to the existing Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness in Idaho) other areas, such as most of the Sapphire WSA, would be better managed in a way that avoids large-scale road building or logging, but allows for things like mountain bike use and seasonally appropriate snowmobile use. The details can be worked out by negotiations between people of good will. This sort of "middle ground" approach that takes into account the unique qualities of each area and the special needs of the surrounding communities should be the goal. Simply imposing the views of one side of the debate by making a blanket release of WSAs is not the way to reach this goal.

Recently Ravalli County made a good step forward toward a better way. By creating the Ravalli County Collaborative (RCC) the commission wisely recognized that the best way to proceed and gain credibility both in the community and with federal and state land managers during their decision making processes was to bring together people from all major interest groups (businesses, conservationists, hunters and anglers, vehicular and non-vehicular recreationists, etc.) to have them consult and find ways to work through thorny land-use issues.

As a political conservative (heck, I happily voted for just about all of you) I take seriously one of the basic tenets of conservatism, that government is generally best when done at the most local level. So if a diverse group of area residents, who are most directly impacted by land management decisions, can come up with a land use alternative that protects the local way of life, the vitality of the local economy, and still protects the land, water, and wildlife resources valued by everyone then that approach should, at a minimum, be given extremely strong weight.

In Montana we know this approach can work because it has been and is being done. It worked along the Rocky Mountain Front when local residents hammered out a plan to support the area's ranchers, permanently protect parts of this unique landscape, deal with noxious weeds, and address other concerns specific to this area. It has worked in the Blackfoot-Clearwater area where they have agreed on a carefully crafted plan to set aside certain areas for permanent protection, provide for a stable timber supply for the local mill, deal with needed forest restoration issues, and set aside areas for motorized recreation. It took a while, but very significantly this plan is now endorsed by not only the great majority of local business, recreation groups, and conservationists, but even the county commissions of Missoula, Lewis and Clark, and Powell Counties. Now, if you can craft a land-use plan that the very conservative folks in Lincoln and the equally liberal people in Missoula can both sign onto, you should probably get a Nobel Peace Prize. But, difficult as it seems, they did it. Similar efforts are underway in other parts of the state, with particular progress being made in the Kootenai region of northwest Montana. One of the great benefits of this approach is that with the buy in from virtually every impacted interest group, the chances of all those costly and ridiculous lawsuits is greatly diminished as is all the bickering so prevalent in other debates.

Here in the Bitterroot our concerns are not the same as those in other parts of Montana. Here we have, among other things, a particular need to address urban-wildland interface fire issues, to ensure a continued abundant supply of clean water for our vitally important sport fishing industry, to provide for abundant opportunities for wilderness recreation (a major reason why people like my wife and I moved here and a huge attraction for tourists and local industries), to set aside specific areas for motorized recreation, to address connectivity of wildlife populations both for the good of the animals and to ensure continued excellent hunting opportunities, and to find a stable supply of timber for value-added industries like our log-home manufacturers. If diverse stakeholders are given the chance to hammer out a big-picture plan to reach these (and other) goals, the result probably won't please everybody but it will certainly lead to less acrimony and, hopefully, a plan everyone can accept without all the bickering and lawsuits.

Unfortunately, Ravalli County's tentative efforts to work toward a true collaborative, long-term solution are significantly undermined when the commission bypasses its own group (the RCC) and instead simply adopts, in total, one side's position. This cuts the legs right out from under the RCC and it causes the commission to lose the credibility it could have gained by getting the buy in from the RCC (or some other collaborative group's) members.

The best long-term solution to the question of how to finally deal with wilderness study areas (and other wild areas not so designated) is not to impose one side's viewpoint, but to fully involve a diverse cross-section of interested groups. I don't contend that it will be easy, but it's been proven that it can be done and there is no reason why we can't do it here in the Bitterroot as well. I respectfully ask the commission to move toward this collaborative way of reaching a "middle ground" that addresses all of our area's unique needs and actually "fixes" one of our most contentious land-use issues for decades to come.

Once again, I sincerely thank the commissioners for their time and willingness to hold a second public hearing. If the rules allow, I would appreciate it if this comment letter could be made a part of the meeting record.