

Glenda Wiles

From: Larry Campbell <lcampbell@bitterroot.net>
Sent: Tuesday, February 20, 2018 9:09 AM
To: Glenda Wiles
Subject: Letter re S 2206
Attachments: Rav Co FOB testimony S 2206 Daines WSA release (002).doc

February 19, 2018

Please accept this testimony from:

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Larry Campbell, Conservation Director

Friends of the Bitterroot opposes S 2206, and we oppose the Ravalli County Commissioner's letter supporting S 2206. Senator Lee Metcalf, who carried the Montana Wilderness Study Act (S 393) through Congress was a local, from the Bitterroot.

FOB has worked for over 30 years to protect Montana Wilderness Study Areas. We have monitored and documented conditions and use of three WSAs (Sapphire WSA, Blue Joint WSA and West Pioneer WSA) for over 15 years. Senator Daines' S 2206 is a top down effort to undo what took years of public discourse and involvement to legislate. There was a tremendous amount of local and state-wide public involvement involved in passage of S 393, the Montana Wilderness Study Act. There has been virtually no such public involvement by Senator Daines in his effort to release WSA protection. There has been much misrepresentation by Senator Daines in his characterization of positions taken by Montanans regarding S 2206, and the Ravalli County Commissioners are following Daines' lead by misrepresenting the views held by many Ravalli County residents, as witnessed by all (both) of the public hearings on the issue.

Montana Wilderness Study Act

Nine particularly important wildland areas of Montana were established as Wilderness Study Areas by Congress in 1977 by the Montana Wilderness Study Act (S. 393). Senator Lee Metcalf of Stevensville sponsored the Act. The late FOB steering committee member Clif Merritt, of Hamilton, was instrumental in identifying and selecting the nine areas based on their major importance for Wilderness designation, threats to their wilderness attributes, and substantial local support.

In testimony on S. 393, the late Bitterroot wildland advocate Doris Milner referenced salient facts that suggested the need for more Wilderness, including the decline in maximum size and quantity of the large areas (>100,000 acres) at the national level as well as the increasing rate of use of Wilderness areas. She answered opponents question "How much wilderness do we need?" by asking "How do we retain what little pristine remains?". Her answer was that S-393 was a partial solution.

The Act says, "[Montana's WSAs] shall, until Congress determines otherwise, be administered by the Secretary of Agriculture [USFS] so as to maintain their presently existing wilderness character and potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System." The idea was to protect the wilderness quality of these special places before the incessant press to develop overtook the chance to fully protect them within the Wilderness System.

The Forest Service failed to maintain 1977 “existing wilderness character” as they failed to regulate the explosive increase of motorized recreational vehicle use on many of Montana’s WSAs, including here on the Bitterroot National Forest (BNF) in the Blue Joint WSA and especially in the Sapphire WSA. For about twenty years FOB has monitored the Sapphire, Blue Joint and West Pioneer WSAs and documented damage caused by inappropriate and illegal motor vehicle use. In October 1996, FOB filed suit as a co-plaintiff in Montana Wilderness Association v. U.S. Forest Service, Case No. 96-152-M-DWM (D. Mont.), a case challenging the Forest Service’s management of Montana’s WSAs. After many years in Federal District Court and the Ninth Circuit Court, the case went clear to the US Supreme Court where in 2004 it was, in effect, dismissed without being ruled on. Since that time, several court cases involving failure to maintain wilderness character in specific WSAs have reinforced the clear mandate to maintain wilderness character. One court ruling that reinforced the need to limit levels of motorized use to that in 1977 also noted “Congress did not, however, mandate that motorized recreational levels be maintained.”. Finally, in 2016 the BNF Travel Plan prohibited motorized and mechanized vehicles in the SWSA and BJWSA. (see article on Travel Plan)

Sapphire Wilderness Study Area

FOB believes the Sapphire WSA is one of the most biologically valuable areas in the Bitterroot. It is approximately 98,000 acres in size, about 25 miles long X 5 to 10 miles wide, ranging from 5,000 feet to 9,000 feet in elevation. It contains numerous lakes and large meadows. Adjacent to the Anaconda – Pintler Wilderness, it serves as a critical wildland link in the Sapphire crest regional wildland biological corridor, providing premium value in this age of climate change due to its cooler high elevation secure habitat and north-south orientation, offering a path for migration to the north. The corridor has proven itself. Grizzly bears have wandered back to the Bitterroot along the Sapphires. Whitebark pine on the crest and swaths of huckleberry bushes provide important food sources for bears. A dwindling mountain goat herd and imperiled wolverines live there.

Blue Joint Wilderness Study Area

The Blue Joint WSA near Painted Rocks Lake is 68,000 acres of prime wildlands, including over 65,000 acres on the Bitterroot NF, contiguous with the Frank Church - River of No Return Wilderness and the Selway – Bitterroot Wilderness. Elevations range from 4,900 feet to 8,600 feet. Slopes on over half the area exceed 60%. Whitebark pines, a valuable food source, grow at the higher elevations. The large Blue Joint meadows provide diversity of habitat. This WSA serves as a buffer between the Big Wilderness to the west and development from the east pushing in from the southern end of a fast-growing Bitterroot Valley. The BJWSA provides dependable clean water at the head of the Bitterroot River as well as habitat for wildland species.