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# Commissioners stand firm in support of releasing wilderness study areas for managed use

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*Well over 200 people attended last week's meeting called by the Ravalli County Commissioners to reconsider a letter the commissioners had sent to Sen. Steve Daines in support of releasing Sapphire and Blue Joint Wilderness Study Areas for managed use. After listening to the public comment, the commissioners reaffirmed their support for release. Michael Howell photo.*

*Hundreds turn out to weigh in on issue*

**By Michael Howell**

At a meeting last week, the Ravalli County Commissioners re-affirmed their position stated in a letter sent to Senator Steve Daines last September advocating the release of the Sapphire and Blue Joint Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) for management and in opposition to any new wilderness designations on the Bitterroot National Forest.

The letter came into focus recently as Senator Daines prepared to submit proposed legislation, S2066, to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources

Committee that would do just that, along with three other WSAs in the state. The Commissioners recently received a letter signed by several citizens asking them to reconsider and perhaps retract the letter. They claimed that the September meeting got insufficient public notice and was poorly attended. They note that the few members of the public who did participate in the meeting all spoke against sending the letter. They requested that another meeting be scheduled and the letter reconsidered.

The Commissioners decided to oblige the request and scheduled a meeting at the county administration building for Wednesday, February 7, the same day that Daines' bill was scheduled to be heard by the Senate committee. When too many people began showing up for the meeting, the Commissioners moved it to the First Interstate building at the Fairgrounds.

With little introduction, the Commissioners began taking public comment. Over 200 people attended the meeting. Public comment was overwhelmingly in opposition to the letter and in opposition to Daines' bill. Out of 77 speakers, 50 spoke in opposition to the letter and in opposition to the bill. Twenty-two spoke in support of the letter and the bill. Commissioner Jeff Burrows stated that written comment received by the Commissioners was running 78 in opposition to the letter to 31 in support of the letter, with 16 not stating clearly either way.

A theme echoed many times throughout the public comments was the lack of meaningful public participation in the process.

"You write a letter claiming to speak for Ravalli County but there is no evidence that you made the least effort to find out what Ravalli County thinks on the complex and controversial subject," said Russ Lawrence. He was also critical of what he saw as the failure of the Commissioners to use the Ravalli County Collaborative Committee that was set up to review natural resource issues like this.

The criticism of the Commissioners' meeting in September was extended to include Senator Daines' handling of his proposed bill.

"It's hard for me to believe such a huge public land issue wasn't properly discussed with Montanans by Senator Daines," said the first speaker, Marilyn Wolff. "It will be the biggest loss of Montana wildlands in history without Montanans being able to voice their opinions."

These concerns over the lack of public involvement in writing the letter and the bill were echoed by many of the speakers. Many of the speakers emphasized the lack of any real "collaboration" with the public on the issue. Some pointed to the successful collaborations going on elsewhere over natural resource issues and in the past in Ravalli County.

Many people spoke about the innate value of wilderness and the need to keep some places that are untouched by management projects. They pointed to the wildlands on the forest being the source of clean, clear water for all our purposes. Several mentioned the importance of the economy that has grown up around wilderness areas over the last few decades.

Someone pointed out that a study of Montana's economy had revealed that the counties with wilderness areas were growing economically at a faster rate than any other counties in the state.

"Why would you want to kill the goose that lays the golden egg?" said Ted Klause.

Former County Attorney George Corn called Daines' bill "a meat axe approach to a very complex issue," that would open the headwaters of the river to mining, and gas and oil development.

Bitterroot Trout Unlimited advocated for legislation that “addresses additional wilderness as well as releasing lands not well suited is a better approach than all or nothing.”

Another refrain from those in opposition to the letter and the bill was that the land in question belongs to every American, not just Ravalli County residents. Although wilderness makes up a very large portion of the Bitterroot National Forest, in the big picture, that is across the United States, only 2.7% of the country’s original forests remain.

Supporters of the letter had another view about that. “We’ve already done our part for the country,” said Charles Wissenbach, “we’ve already done our part for wilderness.” Others echoed the point that far too much of the local forest had been “locked up” and “enough is enough.”

Pat Earnest had heard enough from the opposition and said it was “a disgrace that so many came forward to slander you commissioners. I know that you care about us and Senator Daines cares about us.”

Supporters of the letter and the bill also brought up the danger that wilderness areas pose in terms of wildfire, pointing to large fires that started in the wilderness and then moved out onto managed lands and private lands in catastrophic fashion.

“It’s public property, but it’s our back yard,” said a Pinesdale resident who advocated for multiple use of the resources. “I’d like to keep this land open for everybody to use,” he said. “It’s like a garden, if we don’t take care of it, we will lose it.”

South valley state legislator Theresa Manzella emphasized the severity of the health hazard that wildfires are posing for our community by spewing dangerous carcinogens into the air. She donned the only kind of breathing mask that can protect the lungs from small particles of silica to make her point.

After taking public comment, Commissioner Greg Chilcott said, “This isn’t something we dreamed up in the middle of the night and snuck in under the cloak of darkness to write this letter. It’s been well-discussed in Ravalli County for decades.” He said that the Forest Service’s data shows that the Sapphire WSA was determined to be unsuitable for wilderness back in the 1980s. He noted that the Montana Association of Counties had a longstanding policy of releasing all WSAs.

Commissioner Chris Hoffman said, “I chafe at the accusation that this was done in secret.” He said after listening to the comments that it sounded like “most people are asking for the same thing whether they are on one side or the other. You want it looked at harder. This is how we get that done. It is, whether you like it or not, a representative republic. A bill is introduced and then collaboration and the public process begins and that’s how it works in this country.”

“If this letter had not come out, I would have written one on my own,” said Hoffman.

Chilcott said the thing “had been kicked down the road for 41 years” and now what he’s hearing from some people is “let’s kick it down the lane a little further and keep it locked up. Frankly I’m frustrated by that.”

The Senate Energy and Natural Resource Committee made no decision on Wednesday and will continue to accept public comment about Senator Daines’ bill, called the Protect Public Use of Public Lands Act, and the bill submitted by Senator Jon Tester that would extend wilderness protection to about 790,000 acres in the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act.