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<http://www.kpax.com/story/37561416/daines-dodges-wilderness-study-area-protesters-during-hamilton-visit>

Protesters accuse Daines of dodging Wilderness Study Area advocates during Hamilton visit

HAMILTON - Senator Steve Daines says his bill to remove Wilderness Study Area designation from five Montana forest lands is aimed at wildfire safety, and resolving a stalemate that's existed for 40 years.

But protesters accuse the Senator of dodging their objections to his WSA bill during visits in Hamilton and Philipsburg.

Daines has proposed removing the WSA designation from five locations, including the Sapphire and Blue Joint in the Bitterroot. But the plan is running into sharp opposition, with Ravalli County commissioners bearing the brunt of the complaints during a hearing two weeks ago.

On Wednesday, Daines stopped at a Hamilton power sports dealer to discuss the proposal with snowmobilers, ATV riders and others.

"You know, I hope we can find a balance here," Daines said. "There's plenty of room in Montana to have wilderness areas. We also need to release those areas that aren't suitable for wilderness. And that's what this bill does. It says those areas that have been determined to be not

suitable for wilderness, by the Forest Service, we should release to full multiple use.”

Daines had been scheduled to appear at 1:15 p.m. but showed up an hour earlier. That meant protesters with the Montana Wilderness Association and other groups were late, and were just starting to gather outside when the Senator was wrapping up. They’re upset that Daines came and went without discussing the bill with them, saying there should be local, public meetings to discuss the merits and impacts of the WSA change.

Daines believes the issues are clearly laid out, from providing access to thin forests and stop the spread of wildfires, to easing regulatory and legal burdens on the Forest Service, which is having to develop Forest Management Plans while making the WSAs completely off limits to some users.

“Yeah, they’re at the mercy of the Ninth Circuit Court so often, which is not necessarily a good thing for Montana,” Daines said. “And this just also allows us get back into our forests with responsible timber management, to reduce the fuels, those combustibles that are growing on the forest floor. We can do that, reduce the risk of wildfire. And that’s part of why we need to release these WSAs.”

Opponents worry the bill encompasses 450,000 acres, and they say if it’s approved it would be the biggest wilderness rollback in Montana history.