



**PRINTABLE VERSION: Thursday, October 18, 2007**

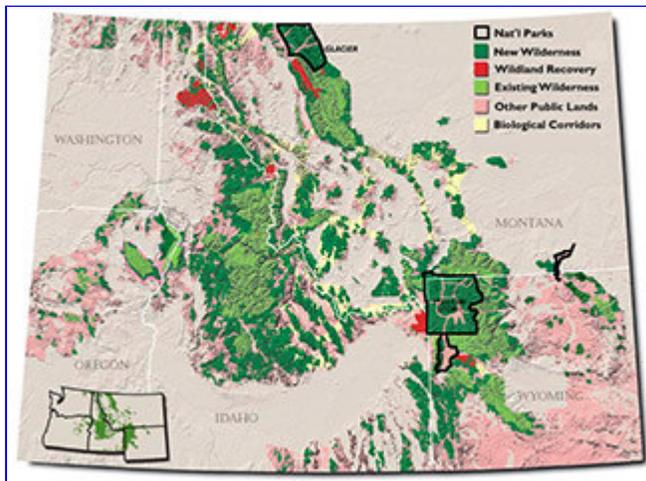
## 1. PUBLIC LANDS: Will Northern Rockies wilderness designation benefit regional economy? (10/18/2007)

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

As Congress resurrects a sweeping plan to designate as wilderness more than 24 million acres of public lands in five Western states, the public debate is expected to center on environmental protection issues as well as the politics of local autonomy versus "top down" federal determinations of land-use restrictions.

The wilderness bill, now called **H.R. 1975**, was first introduced in 1992. Congress held hearings in 1994, but the measure never made it beyond committee, and the Republican leadership kept it bottled up for the past 13 years. That will change today, as the House Natural Resources Committee holds hearings on the latest version of the measure, called the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act (NREPA).

In its latest configuration, NREPA would apply wilderness designations to public forests, parks and grazing lands on a scale unseen since the passages in 1980 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. The bill would cover 9.5 million acres in Idaho, 7 million acres in Montana, 5 million acres in Wyoming, 750,000 acres in eastern Oregon, and 500,000 acres in eastern Washington.



Proposed wilderness areas in H.R. 1975. Click image for a larger view. Map courtesy of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies.

In addition, it would add some 1,800 miles of waterways to the wild and scenic rivers system and restore over 6,000 miles of damaged or unused roads as roadless areas. It would also declare nearly 8.5 million acres as "biological connecting corridors." The language of the act emphasizes that it pertains only to lands already managed by the federal government, and that it will not affect private property rights in any way.

Though the bill, sponsored by Reps. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) and Chris Shays (R-Conn.), has picked up bipartisan support from Western lawmakers, it has also raised the ire of Montana's Rep. Denny Rehberg (R), who decried the bill for ignoring local communities. "Unfortunately, this legislation is a top-down approach that doesn't properly take into account the impacts on the local economy nor does it adequately protect access for hunting, fishing and other forms of recreation," Rehberg said.

For many proponents of H.R. 1975, however, an important underlying issue is a matter of the economic benefits associated with wilderness lands -- not lost opportunities. They claim that empirical evidence has long supported the notion that public lands provide a boost to local economic growth in regions that previously relied on traditional resource industries of timber, mining and energy development.

What's more, according to more recent analysis, the proximity of permanently protected lands such as a wilderness area is an even more attractive amenity. "There's no denying it," says Thomas Patrick Power, a research professor in the School of Economics at the University of Montana. "People are moving where they expect the natural environment to be permanently protected."

Pete Morton, staff economist for the Wilderness Society, agrees that much of the current economic literature supports the concept that wilderness is good for economic growth. "It's not just recreation and tourism. It's the attraction of an educated and talented workforce that's key to local economies," he said.

Unfortunately, Morton said, resource management as practiced by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management too often fails to recognize such values, instead focusing on trying to extract economic value from the lands they manage at higher costs than the financial benefits they derive. "We haven't been able to make money off timber for years," he said. And when it comes to energy development, he added, BLM bases its decisions on what is technically feasible for recovery, not what is economically recoverable.

For Power, the problem is a holdover from traditional views of resource economics, which he characterized as "all wealth springs from the earth, and the heart of the economy lies in what we extract or coax from the earth." Many Western Land Grant colleges and their respective schools of mining, forestry and agriculture, he said, have perpetuated such a view. "Traditional economics ignores what the economy produces and how it produces it in a post-industrial society."

While some might argue that the loss of natural resource-based economies poses a dire threat to vulnerable communities, Power believes otherwise.

"I haven't seen a timber town yet that has had its economy go into a tailspin as a result of the shift to managing forests for recreation and away from extraction services," he said.

Besides, he said, much of the land in question is not conducive to resource exploitation. "Any benefit/cost analysis quickly discovers that these roadless areas are economic wildernesses," he said. "The reason they are roadless is that it doesn't make sense to harvest trees because the cost of putting in roads and other infrastructure far outweighs the gains. I've looked at all five states, forest by forest, and from the point of view of timber, they are all losers. There was no interest in logging those areas because it was so costly."



A view from Boulder Pass in Glacier National Park is one example of the kind of attractive scenery that would be given protections under a bill to designate 24 million acres of western lands as wilderness. Photo courtesy of Glacier National Park.

Morton, of the Wilderness Society, spends most of his time on energy development issues, and points out that except for a few areas of Wyoming, the states affected by H.R. 1975 do not have significant potential for oil or gas development.

The group recently emphasized its point that the amenities associated with public lands are more valuable than energy extraction with a report on the relative contributions of recreation and tourism compared to extraction in the Rockies. While the economic contributions of extractive industries remained static, the group said in a recent report, recreation and tourism generates hundreds of millions of dollars, and income from retirees and investments comprises about 25 percent of the region's economy ([Land Letter](#), Oct. 4).

## Jobs and income seen

Various approaches to quantifying economic benefits from wilderness designations have been tried, including standards benefit/cost analysis. In 2003, Michael Garrity, director of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies, authored a [paper](#) that concluded NREPA would save at least \$245 million over 10 years while creating more than 2,300 high paying jobs in the region. Although he estimated a \$130 million cost to perform ecosystem restoration projects to protect endangered species throughout the wilderness areas, Garrity claimed, "NREPA saves taxpayers money by prohibiting road building and logging in roadless areas designated as wilderness."

Logging at levels projected by the Forest Service -- about 1.8 billion board feet per year -- would result in a net loss of more than \$375 million over a decade, Garrity said. In addition, there would be fewer costs associated with road maintenance and fewer threats to water supplies that the Forest Service itself valued at about \$1 billion. "It makes no economic sense whatsoever to lose hundreds of millions of dollars on logging that harms the most valuable commodity our forests produce, water," he concluded.

The analysis estimated a net gain of some 900 jobs over and above the 1,400 jobs expected to be lost in the wood products industry when logging is prohibited on the lands in question. He cited work by the University of Montana's professor Power that showed even those timber jobs "could be made up in less than three weeks with normal job growth." And even those job loss figures might be overstated.

Capital intensive technology is the main cause of employment declines in timber industry, not lack of trees, the report continued. "Fewer jobs are created now than 30 years ago because of advances in technology. One person can cut in an hour what a two-person crew could cut in a day 20 years ago. With today's technology, only 560 timber industry jobs would be lost if we preserve these lands as wilderness. If we cut all of these lands today, 560 people would be employed for one year."