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The House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands held a hearing to consider several pieces of public lands legislation with potential impacts in Montana and Utah.

Two of the bills, the Protect Public Use of Public Lands Act (H.R. 5148) and the Unlocking Public Lands Act (H.R. 5149), would remove Wilderness Studies Area (WSA) designations from various lands in Montana managed by the Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM), respectively. In the 1970s, the USFS and BLM were required to evaluate Montana's state lands for potential WSA designations and maintain wilderness-level protections for those sites under investigation in the interim. In the following decades, both agencies carried out their evaluations and released their recommendations for sites that should have official wilderness protection and areas to be released from WSA status to be made available for other uses. Twenty-seven years later, however, these WSAs are still awaiting congressional action to be released from WSA status and potentially designated as National Wilderness. H.R. 5148 would release 449,500 acres from 5 WSAs recommended by the USFS for removal from protected status while H.R. 5149 would release 360,000 acres from 24 WSAs.

At the hearing, Greg Chilcott, the county commissioner for Ravalli County, testified that the WSAs are impairing land managers' ability to mitigate the effects of forest fires by impeding brush clearing and harming the economic and recreational prospects of local communities. Various conservation groups have voiced their concern about the WSA bills, citing the dated nature of the USFS and BLM recommendations, lack of community consultation on the bills under consideration, and advancement in the scientific understanding of ecological assets such as wildlife corridors. For example, scientific advancements made in the past two decades could potentially better inform which areas merit additional protection to allow for safe animal migration. Tracy Stone-Manning from the National Wildlife Federation emphasized that there were no public meetings held in Montana in the process of developing either bill, despite requests from stakeholders. Stone-Manning also claimed that the bills were lop-sided, highlighting the fact that the bills remove protections from the WSAs without conferring National Wilderness status to any of the regions suggested by the agencies. In response, Associate Deputy Chief of the National Forest Service Chris French and Deputy Director of BLM Policy and Programs Brian Steed contended that, even without WSA status, the lands would still have federal agency protections, including a consultation process for changes in regional land management plans.

H.R. 5148 is a companion bill to S. 2206, introduced last year by Senator Steve Daines (R-MT), which releases the same amount of WSA. The House and Senate Protect Public Use of Public Lands Acts contrast with another bill, the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act (S. 507), sponsored by Senator Daines' Democratic counterpart, Senator Jon Tester. The Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act would instead add 79,000 acres of wilderness to three different wilderness regions in Montana.

Another bill discussed at the hearing, the Emery County Public Land Management Act of 2018 (H.R. 5727) introduced by Representative John Curtis (R-UT-3), would establish a National Conservation Area, a National Monument, and wilderness areas in Utah, potentially affecting almost one million acres of land. H.R. 5727 also has a companion bill in the Senate (S. 2809), introduced by Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT).

Sources: Library of Congress; Salt Lake Tribune; U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources; U.S. Senate.
