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Conservationists Challenge Helicopter Intrusions in Premiere Wilderness Area

POCATELLO, Idaho – A coalition of conservationists, represented by Earthjustice, today filed a legal challenge to the decision by the U.S. Forest Service to allow the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) to conduct approximately 120 helicopter landings in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness as part of a program to manipulate wildlife populations in the wilderness.

At issue is the Forest Service's Jan. 6, 2016 decision to issue a permit allowing IDFG to land helicopters in the River of No Return through the end of March to capture and place radio telemetry collars on wild elk. The federal Wilderness Act prohibits the use of motorized vehicles including helicopters in wilderness areas.

The helicopter operations permitted by the Forest Service are part of IDFG's broader program to inflate elk numbers above natural levels within the wilderness by eliminating wolf packs that prey on the elk. IDFG's existing elk and predator management plans call for exterminating the majority of wolves in the heart of the River of No Return to provide more elk for hunters and commercial outfitters in an area that receives some of the lightest hunting use in the state.

"A wilderness is supposed to be a refuge from the noise and disturbance of motorized vehicles, not a helicopter landing zone," said Earthjustice attorney Tim Preso. "This motorized intrusion on one of our premiere wild areas is made all the worse by the fact that the Forest Service has allowed the state to turn natural wolf predation on elk into a reason to degrade the wilderness with helicopter landings."

Earthjustice is representing Wilderness Watch, Friends of the Clearwater, and Western Watersheds Project in challenging the Forest Service's decision. The groups seek a court order to prevent the helicopter intrusions on the River of No Return.

"This proposal violates everything that makes Wilderness unique," said Wilderness Watch executive director George Nickas. "It's an unprecedented intrusion with helicopters for the sole purpose to make wildlife populations in Wilderness conform to the desires of managers rather than accept and learn from the ebb and flow of nature."

Gary Macfarlane of Friends of the Clearwater added, “Wilderness, by law, is in contrast to areas that are heavily manipulated. This proposal to capture elk with net guns from helicopters is heavy-handed manipulation and denigrates the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness.” “The Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness wasn’t ideal elk habitat until predators like wolves and grizzlies were eradicated,” said Ken Cole, Western Watersheds Project’s Idaho Director. “Now, the IDFG wants to continue manipulating this area and turn one of the nation’s premier wilderness areas into a game farm for outfitters and their wealthy clients.”

At 2.4-million acres, the River of No Return is the largest contiguous unit of the National Wilderness Preservation System in the Lower 48 and hosts abundant wildlife including elk, mountain goats, bighorn sheep, wolves, cougars, and wolverines. It is one of the few public-land wilderness areas of sufficient size to allow natural wildlife interactions to play out without human interference, and for this reason was one of the original wolf reintroduction sites in the Northern Rockies.

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