

It's been a wild ride

By George Nickas

Not long after I started work at Wilderness Watch in the mid-1990s, a law intern dropped by to search our files on a lawsuit involving three Forest Service-approved, illegally built lodges on the banks of the Wild Salmon River in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. It was the issue that led to Wilderness Watch's founding seven years earlier, and the lawsuit was still winding its way through the courts.

As we pored over the files, a letter from a well-known attorney at the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund (SCLDF) caught my eye. It was addressed to Wilderness Watch's founder, Bill Worf, explaining that after reviewing the potential case, SCLDF had concluded it likely wasn't winnable, and they wouldn't take it on. What is unwinnable about a case that challenges the construction of a hunting lodge on a designated Wild River in the middle of the largest Wilderness in the Lower 48, I wondered? What was I missing? What I discovered next opened my eyes—news articles from the time quoting Idaho representatives of the Sierra Club and The Wilderness Society expressing support for the outfitters who built the illegal lodges, and to the Forest Service for approving them. I wasn't new to wilderness battles and I knew politics often played a role in the decisions some conservation groups make, but this was beyond the pale.

The good news was Wilderness Watch found a determined local attorney who saw the Forest Service decision for what it was—a blatant violation of the law to appease

commercial interests and their political allies. With Bill's tenacity and our attorney's legal skills, we won the case, establishing what still stands as a major legal precedent for wild rivers in Wilderness and elsewhere across the country.

It's a story that has played out too many times over the last three decades, each time serving as a stark lesson in why the survival of the Wilderness System and the integrity of the Wilderness Act requires an organization of passionate and committed citizens who will always put Wilderness first. As the newly hired conservation director at Wilderness Watch, I felt really proud to be one of them.

I still do. Thirty years later, as I step aside as Executive Director and new leadership takes the helm, I can't imagine a more satisfying feeling than having spent the past three decades "fighting for the freedom of the Wilderness," and

helping to build a national organization—the only one—that remains steadfastly committed to preserving the integrity of the Wilderness Act and the high ideals it represents.

We've counted many victories over the years, way too many to recount here, but one of the earliest stands out



Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness by Leon Werdinger

In This Issue:



The *Wilderness Watcher* is the quarterly newsletter of Wilderness Watch, America's leading conservation organization dedicated solely to protecting the lands and waters in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

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Message from the Executive Director



It's hard to find the right words for a transition that is both incredibly momentous and not—all at once. George Nickas is a remarkable, hard-to-find blend of a human—a tireless and whip-smart wilderness advocate, a dedicated mentor and friend, an easy laugh, and a solid organizational leader who realizes the value of working hard while staying half feral. Working at Wilderness Watch under George's tenure was never about generating professionals and careers, it was about fighting collectively for the wild places we love and finding the joy in doing it. It was about playing the game well while not getting boxed in by its rules. Wilderness Watch, and the National Wilderness Preservation System, are the better for it.

After 30 years as Executive Director, it's hard to imagine Wilderness Watch without George's leadership. But, George's shoes were so big, we all fit inside. Like the wild communities that thrive on interdependence, George knew that the success of an organization, and a movement, can never rest on the shoulders, or the ego, of any one person. In my 12 years with Wilderness Watch, the organization has more than doubled in size but our driving organizational force has not changed. Wilderness Watch's unrelenting dedication to the wild—above all else—has attracted strong and empowered staff, a uniquely engaged and passionate membership, and a durable board of directors. We are collectively well-suited to carry wilderness defense into its next chapter.

The world is changing rapidly, and while many of the challenges ahead are not new, they come with a new ferocity. Our organizational mission is more important than it has ever been, and our message is as salient as it ever was. In explaining the need for Wilderness, Howard Zahniser said:

This need is for areas of the earth within which we stand without our mechanisms that make us immediate masters over our environment—areas of wild nature in which we sense ourselves to be, which in fact I believe we are, dependent members of an interdependent community of living creatures that together derive their existence from the sun.

In a world of overconsumption, false entitlement, and fabricated realities, Wilderness is an anchor point to the real world—our true home. In the words of Mary Oliver, it “calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—over and over announcing your place in the family of things.”

Our goal in the coming years is to heed this call more than ever, to unapologetically defend Wilderness as an endangered landscape and pull it closer, to start seeing and protecting more of the wild in our own backyards and in ourselves.

The value of Wilderness—to the human spirit, to all of the wild life finding increasingly scarce refuge there—persists, and, as is also the way of things, the forces opposing it continue to grow. The message of the wild has always been at odds with a story centered on profit and human exceptionalism, and the years ahead will demand a new ferocity of the heart from those who defend it. We are ready. 🌿

Dana Johnson is Wilderness Watch's new Executive Director after serving as our Policy Director and Staff Attorney for the past 12 years.

Boundary Waters vote proves it's time to repeal the Congressional Review Act

On April 27, the president signed into law H.J. Res. 140, a Congressional Review Act (CRA) joint resolution that struck down a 20-year sulfide-ore copper mining moratorium on 225,000 acres of Superior National Forest land in the watershed of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in northern Minnesota. H.J. Res. 140 passed the House by six votes and the Senate by one.

Spanning 1.1 million acres, the Boundary Waters is the largest Wilderness east of the Rockies and north of the Everglades. Its 1,000-plus lakes and 1,200 miles of rivers and streams create our only canoe-country Wilderness, where backcountry paddlers can experience this place in the same way humans have for centuries—without motors or other industrialization. H.J. Res 140 threatens the Wilderness and its clean water and wildlife with some of the world's most toxic mining, which is no longer prohibited within the watershed.

In our winter newsletter, we discussed the background of the CRA and Congress using it to strike down recent land management plans that were developed with years of analysis and public involvement. We predicted congressional meddling in public land management moving forward. The manner in which Congress passed H.J. Res. 140 is a blueprint for lawmakers to dismantle other protective measures they dislike and illustrates why the CRA must be repealed.

The CRA is triggered by actions and governed by time periods. Before an agency's "rule" can take effect, the agency must submit the rule and a report to both chambers of Congress. A member of Congress has 60 days to introduce a joint resolution disapproving the rule. As in this case, where the Senate received a CRA resolution passed by the House, the CRA forces a Senate vote within 60 session days. These time periods had limited the law's reach before H.J. Res. 140.

The Biden administration published the mineral withdrawal order on January 31, 2023. Yet Rep. Pete Stauber (R-MN) introduced the CRA resolution striking that order to the House on January 12, 2026—almost three years later. How and why could this happen?

The first step was Congress broadening what it considered a "rule." Previously, a "rule" had been a regulation, passed to become part of the Code of Federal Regulations. In 2025

Congress reinterpreted "rule" to include land management plans and introduced CRA resolutions to nullify plans that lawmakers didn't like. One of these plans that Congress didn't like was the Central Yukon Land Management Plan in Alaska, which would have prohibited construction of the 211-mile Ambler Mining Road across our wildest public lands in Alaska. Land management plans and other agency actions—never before "rules"—became rules.

The second step was using this broadened definition to manipulate CRA timelines. If a land management plan or an order was never before considered a rule, then the agency wouldn't have submitted to Congress—the action that triggers

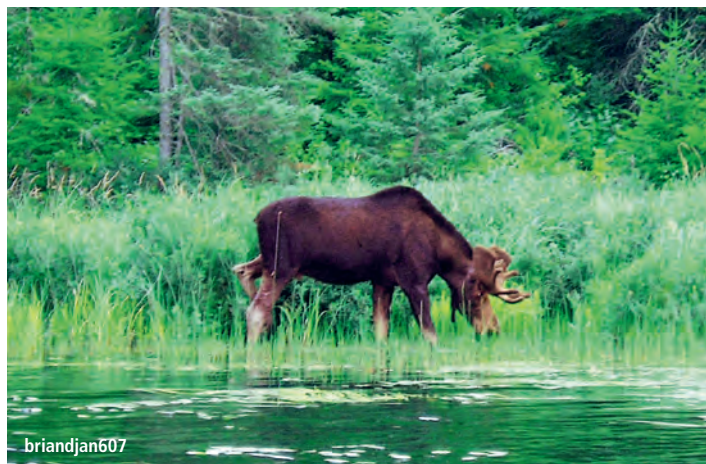
the limited time period for a CRA resolution. Here, in the Boundary Waters case, the mineral withdrawal was published in the Federal Register in 2023, but because the agency hadn't considered this to be a rule, it did not provide the order to Congress.

The current administration happily redefined the mineral withdrawal order as a "rule" and submitted it to Congress, starting the clock. Doing so enabled Rep. Stauber to introduce his CRA (H.J. Res 140), within a "60-day" dead-

line. By expanding the definition of a rule and then applying deadlines to that rule, Congress created a pathway to nullify a mineral withdrawal that had been in place for three years.

Because Congress has broadened "rule" beyond regulations, there are many other agency decisions that weren't submitted to Congress since March 1, 1996 (the date the CRA first allows Congress to review rules). These decisions include public land orders withdrawing land for mining, forest and land management plans, or really any agency decision that lawmakers arbitrarily deem a "rule." This sleight of hand creates opportunities for those now in power to reach back, potentially decades, to a variety of agency decisions they don't like and destroy them, including wilderness and other public land protections, with a simple majority vote.

Extractive industries must have taken notice of this shiny new trick on display with H.J. Res 140. Given Congress has just opened a door for a nihilistic resource grab that can reach beyond public land protections, and given the CRA prevents agencies from making substantially similar decisions when a CRA joint resolution strikes an agency "rule," it's time to push the Congressional Review Act out the door. Otherwise, Wilderness and its wildlife may not be spared. 🍷



Defending Wilderness in Congress

The so-called "Save Our Sequoias Act"

Towering giant sequoias are not only the largest trees on earth by volume, but they can live for up to 3,400 years. Giant sequoias grow in groves throughout Wilderness in the Sierra Nevada in California, where they provide a home and food for countless native species, such as woodpeckers, Douglas squirrels, bats, black bears, Pacific fishers, and many more.

Not only does their thick bark allow mature sequoias to survive most fires, but sequoia's cone-and-seed strategy also evolved with fire. Giant sequoia cones retain their seeds in closed cones for up to 20 years. When fire burns through sequoia groves, the hot air dries out older cones, which then open and rain down their seeds onto fire-swept, bare soil.

Last summer, Wilderness Watch staff visited burned sequoia groves in Wilderness in California and found thick natural regeneration of giant sequoia seedlings following recent wildfires, especially in high-intensity burn areas. Some mature sequoia trees died from recent fires, but tens of thousands of seedlings have sprouted to take their place, just as sequoias have done for millennia.

This is why the so-called "Save Our Sequoias Act" (SOSA), a re-introduction from past Congresses, poses such a grave threat to giant sequoia groves, the Wildernesses that protect these groves, and potentially the entire Wilderness System. SOSA has bipartisan support, but prioritizes human management above the evolutionary wisdom of nature. This bill is a profound threat to the Wilderness System.

SOSA is premised on the erroneous assumption that giant sequoias need human action to save them from high-severity fire. The bill allows significant manipulation and trammeling in Wilderness that the Wilderness Act otherwise prohibits. For example, the bill declares a seven-year-long emergency and allows "protection projects" to be carried out with activities like logging living trees of unspecified size, logging dead or "dying" trees (i.e., salvage logging), or other "[a]ctivities to address insects, disease, invasive species, and vegetative encroachment of a giant sequoia grove." One might easily predict how agencies will argue that road construction, vehicles, and motorized tools are essential to project execution. The bill authorizes stewardship contracts so third parties can haul away and sell the trees (i.e., the giant sequoias).

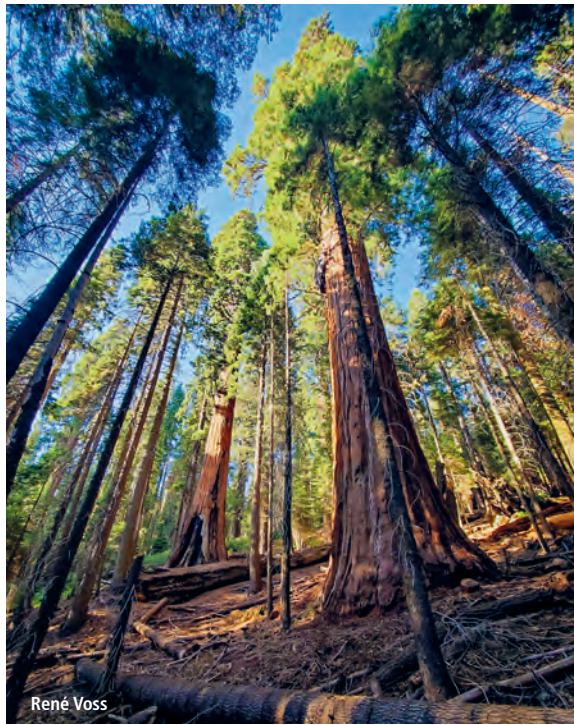
SOSA allows shortcuts around environmental laws, which will impact Wilderness and all public lands. For example, before this administration, agencies had procedures in place for "emergencies" that were immediate and short-term. These procedures allowed environmental analysis or consultation under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) to happen after the emergency (and often after an action was taken). SOSA extends the emergency to a seven-year-long period, raising legitimate questions about whether agencies can wait to follow ESA or National Environmental Policy Act analyses until the end of the seven-year period, long after a project concludes.

While SOSA never mentions "Wilderness," it applies to geographical areas that include Wilderness, such as the Yosemite and Sequoia Kings-Canyon Wilderness. Furthermore, the House Natural Committee's report, which recommended SOSA, pointedly noted that it need not mention "Wilderness" because the committee thought the Wilderness Act allowed all of SOSA's activities in Wilderness, from logging to replanting. Committee reports become important when a court cannot interpret a statute by just reading the text. One of the first resources a court may look to is "legislative history"—the weightiest of which is the committee report on the bill.

This committee report potentially threatens Wilderness nationwide because the committee reinterpreted what it opined the Wilderness Act allows, and courts might reference this report for assistance in statutory interpretation. In one instance involving an Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) provision, a court-setting precedent defied the norms of statutory construction and based its interpretation of ANILCA on a committee report written for an entirely different bill and written after ANILCA was already law. This post-hoc committee reinterpretation allows legislators unfriendly to Wilderness to try to weaken it by claiming that Congress allowed activities that the original drafters never contemplated.

The House passed SOSA on March 16, the same day Sen. Padilla (D-CA) introduced the bill to the Senate. In April, before passing the Farm Bill, the House adopted amendments that included SOSA. Currently SOSA has not been added into any Senate appropriations bill, but remains a threat.

Please call your two senators at 202-224-3121 and urge them to oppose the "Save Our Sequoias Act" (S. 4103). 🐾



Defending Wilderness in the courts

Forest Service appeals decision overturning Buffalo Creek fish poisoning project

The fight to protect Buffalo Creek and the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness adjacent to Yellowstone National Park is not over. Last fall, Wilderness Watch won a landmark victory when a federal district court struck down the Forest Service's approval of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' 10-year plan to poison 46 miles of wilderness streams and dozens of acres of wetlands and lakes with the toxic chemical rotenone using helicopters, motorboats, and other motorized and mechanized equipment in an attempt to eradicate rainbow trout, and then stock these naturally fishless waters with Yellowstone cutthroat trout.

The court rejected the agency's attempt to treat Wilderness as a place for intensive manipulation, emphasizing that wilderness ecosystems are places where "[t]he object is to let nature 'roll the dice' and accept the results with interest and scientific curiosity." In Wilderness, Congress intended that natural processes be allowed to unfold on their own terms.

In May, the government filed its opening brief in its appeal before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, and Wilderness Watch is gearing up to defend the district court's landmark decision. At stake is not only the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness and the Buffalo Creek watershed, but the integrity of the Wilderness Act itself. As the district court recognized, our government agencies cannot poison wild waters, destroy aquatic and insect life, and replace natural conditions in Wilderness with preferred human designs while calling it "restoration." The project would impose precisely the kind of mechanized, manipulative control that wilderness designation was meant to restrain.

With your support, Wilderness Watch will continue to defend the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, Buffalo Creek, the Wilderness Act, and the principle that Wilderness must remain untrammelled. 🙌



Defending the Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain

In January, Wilderness Watch, together with the Gwich'in Steering Committee and conservation allies and represented by Trustees for Alaska, filed a legal complaint to defend the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska from the renewed threat of oil and gas leasing. The Coastal Plain was included in the Obama administration's 2015 wilderness recommendation and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service policy recognizes that recommended wilderness should be managed to preserve its wilderness character.

The lawsuit challenges federal decisions to revive drilling threats in one of Earth's wildest places—an irreplaceable

landscape that supports the Porcupine Caribou Herd, denning polar bears, over 100 species of migratory birds, subsistence resources, and extraordinary wilderness values.

Our lawsuit seeks to overturn unlawful agency approvals, flawed environmental reviews, and lease decisions that prioritize fossil fuel extraction and industrial development over the Arctic Refuge's protective purposes. The case builds on years of

public pressure, legal advocacy, and grassroots action to keep drilling out of the Coastal Plain.

This litigation is part of a broader fight. When the Bureau of Land Management opened a 30-day public comment period for the 2026 Coastal Plain lease sale, more than 8,100 Wilderness Watch members and supporters raised their voices and submitted comments against sacrificing the Arctic Refuge to oil and gas development.

Together, courtroom advocacy and public pressure are helping hold federal agencies accountable. Please stand with Wilderness Watch as we fight to keep the Arctic Refuge wild and free from industrial development. 🙌

for me: our multi-year battle that put the brakes on the National Park Service's plans to run motorized sightseeing tours through the Cumberland Island Wilderness. It pitted our tiny organization (at the time, a staff of three and fewer than 1,000 members) against the National Park Service, some of the wealthiest families in the country, several national conservation groups, and a legal setting—the southern District of Georgia and the conservative 11th Circuit Court of Appeals—where we were told wilderness advocates couldn't win. But we did. David versus Goliath, and Wilderness won, and the result was one of the greatest legal precedents to date for protecting Wilderness.

Another win stands out for a different reason. It was a Forest Service proposal to establish 129 helicopter landing sites in 12 Wildernesses in southeast Alaska to serve the helicopter tourism industry. Imagine the impacts to wildlife and visitors alike from hundreds of helicopters shuttling thousands of tourists, mostly from giant cruise ships, in and out of some of our country's most remote and spectacular Wildernesses so their clients could go heli-hiking, heli-picnicking, heli-sightseeing and the like, and the precedent it would set?

It was the time of snail-mailed action alerts and handwritten comment letters. No form letters and easy clicks, yet we still generated hundreds of heartfelt comments to the regional forester urging him to reverse course and reject the plan... and he did! No lawyers or lawsuits, just citizen pressure and an appeal to reason convinced an agency official to reflect and say no to a plan he pushed earlier. That threat is long forgotten by most, but to this day, I still feel a moment of panic when I'm reminded of what would have happened had Wilderness Watch not sounded the alarm and led the fight.

There have certainly been disappointments. Despite our best efforts, it's been difficult to watch the federal agencies charged with overseeing the Wilderness System abdicate their responsibilities and shed any wilderness ethic they once held. They gutted their wilderness programs—long before Trump—and privatized the job of wilderness stewardship. They kowtow to commercial interests, whose primary goal is to market Wilderness and make a buck, and to state fish and wildlife agencies that seek to turn wild ecosystems into fish and game farms. They're rejecting the traditions of the

pack string and crosscut saw for the modern conveniences of helicopters and chainsaws. They increasingly want to modify wilderness ecosystems to meet managers' desired conditions rather than what Nature provides. Just as the Wilderness System needs citizen organizations committed to the cause, I'm convinced it needs a federal agency overseeing it that puts Wilderness first. Creating that agency is a challenge for the decade ahead.



George in the Cumberland Island Wilderness. Photo by Jerome Walker.

Getting Congress to care about the sorry state of wilderness stewardship has also proved daunting. Not since the early 1990s has there been any interest in making sure wilderness programs are adequately funded and staffed or that the agencies are following the law. It's infuriating that Congress can ignore the harm being done to something as precious to the country as the National Wilderness Preservation System,

but that's been the case regardless of the party in charge. I regret that we've been unable to change that dynamic, but I know we'll keep trying until we succeed.

When I accepted the position of Executive Director in 1998, it was with the understanding that I wouldn't be the typical fundraising E.D. Instead, I'd stay focused on the day-to-day work of protecting Wilderness, with the belief that our members and supporters would reward action with support. It's worked. There have certainly been tough times—market crashes, the Great Recession, a pandemic—but our supporters have never let us down! I'm forever grateful for that.

I couldn't be more pleased that our Board of Directors has chosen Dana Johnson to be our new Executive Director. Dana will be a familiar name to many of you, having worked for Wilderness Watch for the past 12 years. Her knowledge and abilities to advocate for Wilderness are unparalleled. She has a talented, dedicated, never-back-down staff and Board of Directors to ensure that Wilderness Watch is in the best position to help secure an enduring Wilderness for all the wild ones who live there. I'm absolutely confident that our work will continue to make a difference for Wilderness.

Thank you for your support for Wilderness and Wilderness Watch over the years. It's made all the difference.

See you on the trail! 🌿

Happy trails, George

by Howie Wolke

“Gratitude” is the first word that comes to mind when I ponder the retirement of our Executive Director, George Nickas. George took over the Wilderness Watch reins in 1998, and since then has been the heart and soul of the only national organization that focuses primarily on the underappreciated task of defending the Wilderness Act in order to keep designated Wilderness wild. I say “underappreciated” because many conservationists fail to understand the importance of defending designated Wilderness from Congressional and agency-supported intrusions that disrupt the ebb and flow of the evolutionary processes that shape untrammelled Wilderness.

I don’t recall the first time I met George, but as I got to know him, I recall feeling a wave of relief in realizing that the magnificent state of Utah was capable of producing more than just coal, cows, and too many humans. In fact, as a volunteer activist in the late 1970s, George co-founded the first and only Price, Utah wilderness group, the “Slickrock Outdoor Society,” and from 1985–1996 he defended Wilderness

as an employee of the Utah Wilderness Association. He came to Montana and began working for Wilderness Watch in 1996, becoming Executive Director in 1998. As the years passed, I also came to appreciate George as living proof that not all human males are simple-minded, linear-thinking great apes, minimally capable of multi-tasking or complex thought. In fact, as one who can barely walk and talk at the same time, I am truly awed by his ability to simultaneously manage the Wilderness Watch budget, finances, staff, and the interplay of dozens of ongoing issues and legal fights—all done with a smile and an attitude that creates a great work environment for staff and board. Well done, George!

I recently asked George what accomplishments he is most proud of. He mentioned that when he became the Executive Director in 1998, he was one of only two employees,

there were only a few hundred members, and Wilderness Watch was broke. He departs an organization with nine employees, 3,000 members, solid finances, and a dedicated board of uncompromising wilderness fanatics. George also mentioned numerous victories on the ground and in the courts. Although there’s not room here to mention them all, he is particularly proud of our victory over the National Park Service, the Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, and National Parks and Conservation Association in halting Park Service-sponsored motor tours in the Cumberland Island Wilderness in Georgia. He is equally proud of our recent legal victory for the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness

in Montana, in which the courts handed down a great Wilderness Act-supporting opinion that stopped the poisoning of Buffalo Creek. But these examples just scratch the surface. Fact is, from sea to shining sea the American Wilderness is wilder because George Nickas has been there as one of its most effective and ardent defenders. Ever.

In his retirement, George plans to explore as many new

horizons of wildness that he can while his aging joints allow him to carry a pack. And don’t worry. He plans to remain a wilderness activist—as a volunteer—which is how he started out. So you might say he’ll have come full circle.

George has certainly earned a break, and Wilderness Watch will miss him. But I am happy to report that the incoming Wilderness Watch Executive Director, Dana Johnson, is a brilliant and dedicated wilderness proponent who will capably steer the Wilderness Watch ship in an increasingly uncertain future that needs the wild more than ever. 🐾

Howie Wolke has been on the Wilderness Watch board for most of the time since 2001 and is a retired wilderness guide who lives in Montana just north of Yellowstone.



George in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. Photo by Jerome Walker.

On the watch

Protect Wilderness in the Flathead Wild and Scenic River corridor

Roughly 87 miles of the 219-mile Flathead Wild and Scenic River System runs through the gorges and valleys of one of America's most celebrated Wilderness areas—the 1.6-million-acre Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex in Montana. The Bob Marshall, Scapegoat, and Great Bear Wildernesses, which collectively make up the “Bob,” are still home to all of their native wildlife—including grizzlies and wolves.

The Forest Service is proposing new regulations and increased monitoring of recreation use on the Flathead River, including the 87 miles that run through the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex. The *Flathead Comprehensive River Management Plan Environmental Assessment* (EA) proposes some good actions, including: prohibiting parking and car camping on gravel bars, requiring containment of human waste within 200 feet of the river's edge, prohibiting drones, and limiting noise level and group size. However, the agency's plan falls far short by failing to acknowledge current recreation impacts or address the significant threats to Wilderness and wildlife.

Notably, the agency proposes unlimited floating permits, including unspecified increases in commercial outfitting. The EA also fails to provide information on how rampant overuse is displacing wildlife and waterfowl via the endless stream of outfitting and guide services profiting from tours through the river corridor and low-flying aircraft overhead. In just one example, the Schafer Meadows airstrip sees multiple daily flights in the Great Bear Wilderness. One can only imagine how a busy flight pattern is disturbing wildlife in the Wilderness.

The EA fails to consider alternatives that would better protect the Wilderness and Wild River corridor and treats user capacities as recommendations rather than mandatory limits. For the sake of the Bob and its wildlife, the Forest Service needs to limit recreation use and act quickly to address current problems. 🌿

Close Keg Knoll airstrip in the Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness

Wilderness Watch is pushing back on a Bureau of Land Management proposal to open the Keg Knoll airstrip in the Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness just northwest of Canyonlands National Park in Utah to more backcountry aircraft. We're opposing the plan's infrastructure expansion also, which includes parking for ten aircraft, pilot camping, visual markers, and vegetation manipulation.



Keg Knoll airstrip by BLM

While the Bureau of Land Management claims the wilderness airstrip has been in regular and continuous use, the agency's own 2008 Resource Management Plan failed to list Keg Knoll among its “existing and currently used backcountry airstrips” and the airstrip was not listed as active at the time of the wilderness designation in 2019. If there has been any use since the 2008 Management Plan was completed, that use is illegal, and

the Bureau of Land Management has failed in their duty to manage Labyrinth Canyon in accordance with the Wilderness Act.

The agency's process also raises serious concerns under the National Environmental Policy Act. The agency requested public comments before releasing its only environmental analysis—a final Environmental Assessment (EA), which means the public was asked to comment without seeing the agency's reasoning behind the proposal. The EA was published on May 19, and a decision was issued on June 12 authorizing the opening of the airstrip to backcountry pilots, along with the installation of infrastructure and a parking area for up to ten planes.

The Bureau of Land Management needs to drop this plan to expand the airstrip and instead should close it entirely to protect the Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness and its wildlife. 🌿

On the watch

Forest Service could torch 30,000 acres of Wilderness on the Shawnee

Wilderness Watch is opposing a Forest Service proposal to burn nearly 30,000 acres of Wilderness on the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois under the guise of “fuels reduction” and “ecological restoration.” Sweeping manipulation like this is precisely what the Wilderness Act’s “untrammelled” mandate seeks to prevent—humans imposing their will on Wilderness to try to create managers’ desired conditions rather than allowing nature to shape the wild.

The management strategy now being proposed on the Shawnee, which averages nearly 50 inches of precipitation annually, started in the more arid West, where agencies stoked fear of wildfires to justify massive landscape-level projects—including tree cutting, burning, and motorized use, even in Wilderness. As the Forest Service tries to implement the same strategy in the Midwest, they give away the game—it was never about wildfire prevention to begin with. It was about taming wildness.

The Shawnee National Forest’s *Prescribed Burn Project* would allow the agency to burn all 289,000 acres of the Shawnee National Forest, including seven Wilderness areas. Managers would burn in 25,000-acre increments, annually, seemingly in perpetuity. The project would torch the Bald Knob, Bay Creek, Burden Falls, Clear Springs, Garden of the Gods, Lusk Creek, and Panther Den Wildernesses.

The Forest Service’s draft environmental assessment gives no indication it would treat Wilderness differently than the rest of the national forest—that could mean unlawful activities such as chainsaws and lighting fires via drones or helicopters in Wilderness, which ignores the Wilderness Act’s ban on motorized and mechanized tools.

The science the Forest Service is using to justify this project is also highly contested. While the agency claims that the Shawnee is an oak-hickory ecosystem degraded by fire exclusion, a robust body of work has demonstrated the important distinction that the forests of southern Illinois are mesophytic, adapted to moderately moist environments.

Manager-ignited fire in this mesophytic ecosystem would trammel a complex, evolving system that is home to over 500 species of wildlife. The Forest Service’s fires would likely harm the wildlife and ecosystems they claim to help.

The *Shawnee Prescribed Burn* also undermines transparency, accountability, and meaningful public participation by foregoing important site-specific analysis until after the National Environmental Policy Act process is finished. This project, with its landscape-level manipulation, has no place in Wilderness. 🌿

Reining in overuse in the Lizard Head Wilderness

Earlier this spring, the Forest Service invited Wilderness Watch to a meeting after we submitted comments on the agency’s proposal to rein in overuse at Navajo Lake in the Lizard Head Wilderness in southwestern Colorado. The Wilderness is in the San Juan mountains, with two of the state’s 14,000-foot peaks towering over Navajo Lake.

After conducting long-term monitoring, the agency has concluded that there is a lot of overuse in this part of the Wilderness, with 55 inventoried campsites, 29 of which are actively used. The Forest Service’s management guidelines for the area call for no more than six campsites at Navajo Lake. In response, the agency has put forth a proposal to establish nine designated campsites

in areas already in use and to close the rest of the sites. The agency hopes these measures, along with visitor education, will curb overuse.

Wilderness Watch commends the agency for its efforts to protect the Lizard Head Wilderness with its proposed plan and for involving the public via a 30-day comment period. In our comments, we let the Forest Service know that we appreciate both its long-term monitoring efforts and its willingness to act to protect the Wilderness based on the monitoring results. We also noted our support for the agency’s proposal to limit campsites around Navajo Lake, though we question why the agency has proposed nine campsites rather than follow its guideline of six. Finally, we encouraged the Forest Service to let nature reclaim and rehabilitate the closed sites, and if tools are determined to be necessary, to use only hand tools to complete any work. 🌿



Lusk Creek Wilderness by John Wallace

In memoriam—Peter Browning

by Tom Suk

Wilderness lost a friend and steadfast advocate with the recent passing of Peter Browning. In 1990-91, shortly after Wilderness Watch was formed, Peter co-founded the High Sierra Hikers Association (HSHA) based on many of the same principles. The two groups quickly found each other, and worked together where interests aligned.



Peter led HSHA as its president for more than three decades. In the beginning, he rallied hikers to advocate science-based management of Wilderness in California's High Sierra. Peter was particularly concerned that the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service were

allowing commercial stock-packing outfits to continually expand throughout the High Sierra with no real upper limits, resulting in harm to Wilderness, including fragile alpine meadows of the High Sierra. At the same time,

non-commercial wilderness visitors were being increasingly regulated by strict trailhead quotas. Peter and HSHA supported limits on hikers whenever necessary to protect Wilderness, but pointed out that the agencies were failing to similarly limit commercial outfits.

When it became clear that polite advocacy was not always enough to nudge the agencies toward proper wilderness stewardship, HSHA and Wilderness Watch joined over the years to file several legal actions to hold the agencies accountable. Lawsuits filed jointly by Wilderness Watch and HSHA secured multiple court decisions that affirmed the duty of federal agencies to regulate and establish limits on commercial uses, and imposed court-ordered limits when the agencies failed to act. In a case filed jointly by Wilderness Watch and HSHA, a federal court ordered an end to the construction and maintenance of unlawful dams in the Emigrant Wilderness.

Peter was a wilderness explorer, historian, author, publisher of Great West Books, and a staunch supporter of Wilderness. Rest in peace, Pete. We will carry the torch. 🕯️

Tom Suk is a retired wilderness ranger and researcher. He has been a supporter of Wilderness Watch since its founding in 1989.

Gathering to protect the Great Bear

In May, Wilderness Watch co-hosted the 4th annual Great Bear Gathering outside of Missoula. About three dozen wildlife activists from around the region attended the three-day event. We met to discuss strategies for better protecting threatened grizzly bears and their habitat, including Wilderness. Topics covered administrative and congressional threats to grizzly bears, recent court victories, federal and state legislative solutions, tribal perspectives on grizzly bear recovery and management, bear smart practices, public advocacy, and more. Thank you to everyone who attended! 🐻



Park Service proposing cruel killing practices for national preserves in Alaska

Wilderness Watch is opposing a proposed National Park Service (NPS) rule that allows cruel and grossly unethical hunting practices on national preserves in Alaska, including on over eight million acres of Wilderness. This rule, by essentially turning wildlife management over to the State of Alaska, puts wildlife at risk across 19 million acres of the most iconic wild places left in America, including Gates of the Arctic, Denali, and Katmai National Park and Preserve.

Back in 2015, the Obama administration banned a number of cruel, unethical, and controversial hunting practices authorized by the state as part of its efforts to kill as many wolves and bears as possible in an attempt to artificially increase moose and caribou populations. This included: killing mother bears and cubs in their dens; baiting brown and black bears with human food; killing wolves and coyotes, including pups, during denning season; and using dogs to hunt bears.

After the first Trump administration repealed

and replaced the 2015 rule, Wilderness Watch and our allies successfully challenged the Trump-era rule, which a federal court found unlawful. However, the court left the Trump rule in place pending a new rule from the Biden administration.

Unfortunately, the Biden-era rule kept many of the egregious hunting practices, like shooting mother bears and cubs in their dens.

Now the NPS proposes to replace the already weak Biden-era rule with one that allows all of the cruel and unethical pre-Obama-era practices. The proposed rule would expand allowable hunting methods and reduce current federal restrictions in national preserves, including in Wilderness.

Bears, wolves, and other native predators are an integral part of what makes Wilderness truly wild. Using bait to lure bears to their deaths, shooting mothers and cubs in their dens, and killing wolf families are despicable “hunting” practices that have no place anywhere, let alone in Wilderness and national preserves. Wilderness Watch is urging the Park Service to drop the proposed rule and replace it with the 2015 rule. 🐾



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Take a hike! And we appreciate your great support!

By Brett Haverstick

Earlier this summer, I hiked into the Rattlesnake Wilderness near Missoula to see the recently decommissioned dam on McKinley Lake. The earth-berm dam, which was built by hand about a century ago, was removed by a Forest Service blasting crew in 2024, with help from the City of Missoula and the Montana Conservation Corps. It was pretty cool to see the lake outlet flow freely after a century of impoundment. Whether or not dynamite was the “minimum tool” necessary to complete the work in the Wilderness is a conversation for another time!

The current administration can take a hike, too! Whether it's allowing commercial outfitters to unlawfully run chainsaws through Wilderness, shutting out the public in decision-making, foregoing environmental analysis, or using obscure laws to remove wilderness protections, America's Wilderness System is precariously balancing on the edge of a cliff.

But TOGETHER, we are going to see through the storm! All of your relentless activism in response to our action alerts, as well as your generous financial support, enable Wilderness Watch to lead the fight for our irreplaceable Wilderness

and the wildlife that depend on it.

And a big shoutout to our monthly donors! Wilderness Watch has approximately 200 monthly donors, and our goal is to have 250 by the end of the year. Please use the QR code in this newsletter, or visit our website and click the donation button in the top right corner, to start your monthly contribution. Thank you.

If you have any questions about the challenges and opportunities facing Wilderness, please call our office at 406-542-2048, Ext1. We're a citizen-driven organization, and we like it that way! 🐾



Decommissioned dam in the Rattlesnake Wilderness by Brett Haverstick.