



BACKGROUND: WILDERNESS AREAS

The Wilderness Act of 1964

Congress enacted the Wilderness Act in 1964, creating the National Wilderness Preservation System. There are 803 wilderness areas, totaling over 111 million acres, in 44 states and Puerto Rico, and approximately 5% of all land in the United States is designated as wilderness. Four federal agencies – the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) – manage designated wilderness to preserve its wilderness character.

The Wilderness Act defines wilderness as “an area of undeveloped Federal Land ... which generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable; has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation ... and may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.”

The Protecting America’s Wilderness Act

The Protecting America’s Wilderness Act would designate 1,360,500 acres as wilderness or potential wilderness areas, preserving these cherished public lands in perpetuity for the benefit of current and future generations. The benefits of wilderness areas are especially important in light of the impacts of climate change and include improving biodiversity and protecting habitat; safeguarding water quality and quantity; providing recreational opportunities that support rural economies and small businesses; and scientific research. Other potential benefits provided by wilderness areas include subsistence use, cultural and heritage use, education, pollination, and increasing nearby residential property values.

Title-by-Title Breakdown of Wilderness Totals

- Title I would designate approximately 606,826 acres of public land in Colorado as wilderness areas to protect clean water, wildlife, and the unparalleled recreational opportunities that define the state’s culture.
- Title II would designate approximately 312,539 acres of public land in Northwest California as wilderness areas, providing lasting protections for some of the most unique and biodiverse landscapes in the world.
- Title III would designate approximately 287,500 acres of public land in California’s Central Coast as wilderness areas, safeguarding some of the region’s few remaining grassland and alkali wetland ecosystems.
- Title IV would designate approximately 30,659 acres of public land in California’s San Gabriel Mountains as wilderness areas, improving the ecologically connectivity of the watershed while providing lasting protections for clean drinking water and recreational opportunities for one of our country’s most park-poor communities.
- Title VI would designate approximately 131,900 acres of public land on Washington’s Olympic Peninsula as wilderness areas, safeguarding the region’s old-growth temperate rainforests and cold freshwater rivers that provide clean water, critical fish and wildlife habitat, and abundant recreational opportunities.

Special Provisions

Wilderness is not a “one-size fits all” or “no management” designation. Each of these titles include numerous special provisions to address local concerns and provide for management in support of their wilderness quality characteristics. For example, all titles include a provision to allow management to address fire, insects and diseases. Other provisions address military training, tribal and treaty rights, and protection of valid existing rights, including private property rights.