

STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS

HEARING ON H.R. 279

MAY 11, 2022

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding today's legislative hearing on H.R. 279, the *Roadless Area Conservation Act*. I appreciate the opportunity to testify and state my strong objections to this legislation.

My name is Richard Lunt and I am a county supervisor from Greenlee County, Arizona, located in southeastern Arizona. Our county seat, Clifton, is approximately 200 miles southeast of our state capital, Phoenix. We are geographically the second smallest county in the state and the smallest by population at 9,400. Federal agencies own approximately 905,000 acres in Greenlee County, or about 77% of the land within our jurisdiction. The U.S. Forest Service is the county's biggest landowner with almost 750,000 acres.

Roadless Areas and H.R. 279

Decisions made by federal lands agencies impact the lives of our citizens, our economic potential, environmental quality, and public safety. Our federal forests are overgrown and fire prone due to a lack of proper, scientific management to limit the potential for wildfire or a commonsense partnership between federal lands agencies and productive industries in need of raw materials.

One cause of the dangerous overgrowth in the National Forest System is the 2001 Roadless Rule. This regulation established 58.5 million acres of de facto wilderness areas overnight—an area the size of Utah and New Hampshire combined. No roads can be constructed or maintained in roadless areas, and timber harvests are totally banned. In essence, the federal government made one-third of the national forests inaccessible to millions of recreators, ended any prospect of sustainable timber harvests to support rural economies, and made it more difficult for wildland firefighters to attack ignition sources.

While the Roadless Rule is undoubtedly well-intentioned and meant to protect our forests and watersheds, after 21 years we need to admit it is a failure. H.R. 279 doubles down on failure by codifying the 2001 Roadless Rule. The one positive aspect of the bill is it allows for Colorado and Idaho's state-specific Roadless Rules to remain intact. However, the other 48 states would be locked into the highly restrictive 2001 Rule moving forward and forced to live with the consequences of a one-size-fits-all Washington mandate that does not account for each area's unique environmental needs and geographic features.

Roadless Area Wildfire Research and the Wallow Fire

Last year, researchers from Oregon State University and the Washington State Department of Natural Resources compared fire activity in roadless and roaded areas across the west.¹ The conclusions are striking. While factors such as higher elevation, increased moisture and lower temperatures in roadless areas make them less conducive to wildfire, their "extent was far greater in these areas than in roaded areas."

¹ <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/ac13ee/pdf>

The study reviewed large wildfires between 1984-2018. While roadless areas experienced around one-third the number of fire ignitions compared to roaded areas, almost three-times as many fires in roadless areas escaped containment compared to roaded areas. Nearly the exact same number of fires have escaped containment in roadless areas, despite a much smaller number of ignitions in roadless areas.

One of the fires featured in the study, the Wallow Fire of 2011, ignited in Greenlee County. It burned over 500,000 acres in Arizona and New Mexico and is the largest in Arizona's history so far. It was ignited by a campfire and escaped containment quickly, burning through the roadless area and eventually consuming hundreds of thousands of acres in roaded areas. While only 11% of the fire burned through roadless areas, it is a perfect example of the study's conclusions: fires are far more likely to escape containment if they ignite in a roadless area.

The Wallow Fire turned the Blue and the San Francisco Rivers black with sediment and debris, killing the native fish populations and polluting our watersheds. The Forest Service is unable to maintain assess trails in portions of the Blue Range Primitive Area, the last designated primitive area in the National Forest System, leaving recreators at severe risk of mudslides, falling trees and other life-threatening hazards. The Wallow Fire conserved nothing and destroyed nearly everything.

It also forced the Arizona towns of Alpine, Nutrioso, Springerville and Greer to completely evacuate. However, because of the forest health treatments performed in the Wildland-Urban Interface surrounding these communities, the fire dropped to the ground and the towns were spared the worst of it.

Forest Service's New Management Strategy

On January 18, U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and U.S. Forest Service Chief Randy Moore unveiled the *Confronting the Wildfire Crisis*² white paper, which unveiled their initial plans for implementing the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). This white paper lays out a clear strategy to treat some of the most fire-prone federal and non-federal landscapes with a goal of treating an additional 50 million acres over the next five years. The white paper calls for thinning forests and returning prescribed and natural low-intensity fire to the landscape. I appreciate and support these efforts. I also thank the U.S. Forest Service leadership for including the 4-FRI project in Arizona in their initial round of IIJA forest management projects. Permanently locking off nearly 60 million acres from most management activities and all road construction completely counteracts this strategy.

In addition to the challenges posed by a lack of forest management activities, roadless areas also make the job of wildland firefighting—one of the most dangerous professions in the world—even more hazardous. If crews cannot access an ignition source in a timely manner, especially in an overgrown and dried out de facto wilderness area, the scope and scale of the fire will only expand. In addition, with the Forest Service is struggling to fill its wildland

² <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Confronting-Wildfire-Crisis.pdf>

firefighter slots due to competition from other governments and private entities. H.R. 279 will further strain this limited pool of well-equipped and trained firefighters. Finally, increased catastrophic fires will unleash more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and deal significant setback to the nation's efforts to reduce carbon emissions. This legislation is based on wishful thinking, rather than science and the reality in our communities.

Conclusion

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the chance to discuss my strong objections to H.R. 279. This legislation would lead to more large-scale fires, threaten community safety, and decimate our landscapes and watersheds. Thank you for holding today's hearing on this critical issue and I look forward to your questions.