

**Testimony of Christopher A. Wood
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On behalf of Trout Unlimited and the National Wildlife Federation**

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
Washington, D.C.**

**Hearing on S. 1470, S. 1719, S. 1787, H.R. 762 and H.R. 934
December 17, 2009**

Chairman Wyden and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to provide my views as Chief Operating Officer for Trout Unlimited (TU) on S. 1470, the Forest Jobs and Recreation Act. Prior to working for TU, I served as the senior policy and communications advisor to the Chief of the US Forest Service, and on the fish and wildlife and ecosystem management staffs for the Bureau of Land Management.

TU is dedicated to the protection and restoration of our nation's trout and salmon resources and the watersheds that sustain them. TU has more than 135,000 members in 400 chapters across the United States. Our members generally are trout and salmon anglers who give back to the waters they love by contributing substantial amounts of their personal time and resources to fisheries habitat protection and restoration. I am offering this testimony today on behalf of TU and the National Wildlife Federation (NWF). Since 1936, NWF has worked on behalf of its four million members and supporters to protect and restore wildlife, habitat and natural systems for our children's future.

More than 2,000 TU and 5,000 NWF members live and work in communities around the National Forest and BLM areas in this bill, including Butte, Anaconda, Deer Lodge, Sheridan, Twin Bridges, Silver Star, Philipsburg, West Yellowstone, Cameron, Dillon, Ennis, Bozeman, Missoula, Drummond, Ovando, Bonner, Whitehall, Libby and Troy. Most members in these areas are long-time or native Montanans and they fish, hunt, hike, camp, drive, snowmobile, ski, ride horses, and collect firewood, berries and Christmas trees from these lands. A number have livelihoods directly tied to these lands, working as guides and outfitters, loggers, ranch hands, staffers in natural resource agencies or operators of small businesses.

Several years ago, spurred by the recognition that National Forests in western Montana were not living up to their potential to support healthy fish and wildlife and provide jobs and recreational opportunities for local communities, TU and other local stakeholders came together to develop a shared vision for forest management. The resulting compromises provided the basis for an important part of S. 1470, which would protect fish and wildlife habitat through the designation of 670,000 acres of new wilderness and more than 300,000 acres of special management and national recreation areas, restore degraded habitat through the removal of old roads and blocked culverts, reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire through targeted fuel reduction projects, and create jobs for local communities through stewardship contracting. If implemented, the bill could yield significant benefits to fish and wildlife, water resources, and nearby communities.

TU and NWF have a long record of working with farmers, ranchers, industries, and government agencies to protect and restore trout and salmon watersheds nationwide. In recent years, TU has bought gas leases in Montana to help protect the Rocky Mountain Front, helped to establish a successful roadless area plan for the National Forests of Idaho, and helped to establish and fund historic, broadly-supported dam removal projects from the Penobscot River in Maine to the Klamath in California and Oregon. NWF has worked with ranchers in the Greater Yellowstone region to eliminate livestock grizzly bear conflicts on over a half a million acres. Finding solutions to vexing resource problems is a hallmark of what we do.

Drawing on these cooperative experiences, we have worked to develop the solutions contained in S. 1470 with a diverse group of stakeholders in Montana. Bruce Farling, Montana TU's Executive Director, has led TU's efforts on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge, and TU volunteer Tim Linehan has been a leader in the Kootenai initiative. Tom France, director of NWF's Northern Rockies Office in Montana, has a history of working with timber companies dating back to the 1980s on such issues as grizzly bear conservation, stream and road restoration, and large landscape restoration.

All of these people, and their coalition partners, have done courageous, outstanding work. TU and NWF strongly support S. 1470, we deeply appreciate the work of Senator Tester and his staff for introducing it, and we urge the Subcommittee to support it.

We realize that some people have concerns about some of the provisions of this bill. We do not claim to have all the answers and look forward to working with the Subcommittee, the Forest Service, the Obama Administration, and all others who share the goals of the bill. We urge others with criticisms to provide alternatives that will achieve the goals of the bill, namely protecting vital fish and wildlife habitat, restoring forests, and sustaining local communities.

In my testimony today, I would like to focus on two major points.

First, I will describe how S. 1470 would benefit fish, wildlife and local communities.

Second, I will address some of the criticisms of this legislation, and explain why in spite of the challenges we face, I believe the goals of the legislation can be achieved.

Background on the Development of S. 1470

In an August 14, 2009 speech in Seattle, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack stated that Americans must move away from polarization and "...work towards a shared vision—a vision that conserves our forests and the vital resources important to our survival while wisely respecting the need for a forest economy that creates jobs and vibrant rural communities." Through a collaborative grassroots effort dating back more than four years, a broad range of partners has done just that, and the resulting vision has provided the basis for the legislation introduced by Senator Tester.

Prior to this collaborative process the forests were mired in stalemate that failed to protect and restore fish and wildlife. Wilderness has not been designated in the state of Montana in 25 years, despite the broad recognition of the need to protect quality fish and wildlife habitat and public support to do so. There are hundreds of impassible culverts on the forests that fragment trout

habitat. Dense networks of obsolete roads restrict elk security and movement, and contribute heavy loads of sediment to streams.

Due in part to these impacts, native salmonids, some of which are listed or candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act, occupy but a small fraction of their historic range. Decades of fire suppression has produced homogenous even-aged stands of forests, which along with climate change and the pine bark beetle infestation increase the risk of unnaturally intense fire. The Forest Jobs and Recreation Act will enable the Forest Service to address these long-neglected needs.

The Forest Jobs and Recreation Act results from three grassroots efforts in which TU in Montana was a principal in two efforts (Beaverhead-Deerlodge and Three Rivers) and a supporter in the third (Blackfoot-Clearwater). The bill is Montana-made, and it has generated unprecedented consensus among many Montanans of different stripes that validates the notion that collaboration is vital to developing long-term popular support of public lands management.

The Fish and Wildlife Benefits of the Forest Jobs and Recreation Act

Now more than ever, as changes in climate increase the challenges faced by forest managers and ecosystems, it is imperative that national forests are managed in ways that promote resiliency. At its heart, S. 1470 is a climate change adaptation strategy. By federally protecting the highest quality landscapes and then reconnecting them to adjacent areas through watershed restoration, S. 1470 will help to maintain abundant fish and wildlife populations while providing multiple benefits to human communities through good paying jobs. As we recently stated before this committee, this can be done through the following actions:

1. Protect the highest quality lands and waters.

The Forest Jobs and Recreation Act would protect as federal wilderness 670,000 acres of undeveloped country in 25 areas, as well as create over 300,000 acres of special management and national recreation areas. By doing so, it will protect crucial sources of clean, cold water as well as essential habitats for wild and native trout in the headwaters of some of the nation's most storied trout waters, including Rock Creek and the Madison, Beaverhead, Ruby, Jefferson, Big Blackfoot, Clark Fork and Kootenai Rivers. Protection of wilderness and special management areas in the bill will also help secure habitats for Canada lynx, a listed species, as well as wolverines and mountain goats – all species that need undisturbed habitats. Finally, it will provide vital habitat for elk security.

The protection of high quality habitat, along with the reconnection and restoration projects described below, will help secure populations of one ESA listed fish species, bull trout, and three additional fish species that are candidates for listing: westslope cutthroat trout, arctic grayling, and interior redband trout. All of these species now inhabit only a small portion of their historical ranges on the lands in the bill. The wilderness and special area designations serve as critical sources for fish that are necessary for re-populating restored habitats downstream.

2. Reconnect landscapes so that fish and wildlife can survive habitat disturbances.

Restoration projects will be focused on areas of high road density. Obsolete road networks in Montana forests cause habitat fragmentation that prevents fish and wildlife from dispersing to

intact habitats when faced with disturbances such as fire, drought or intense storms. The Forest Jobs and Recreation Act would address the problems caused by these road networks by (1) prohibiting the construction of new, permanent roads; and (2) requiring that road densities be reduced. (For example, in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, the road standard is to leave post-project landscapes with a road density that averages no more than 1.5 linear road mile per square-mile.) The scientifically based standard recommended by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks for elk security is one mile per 1.5 square mile, which is the minimum needed to provide enough security for elk so that Montana can maintain its annual 5-week general big game hunting season. The Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest and the Seeley Lake Ranger District include some of the most productive lands anywhere in Montana for large, trophy elk. The road standards in S. 1470 will also protect high quality habitat and improve wildlife security for a host of popular game and non-game species, including mule deer, black and grizzly bears and mountain goats.

The road standards will also greatly benefit fish by reducing erosion-prone road surfaces and road crossing structures such as culverts that are currently harming habitat and impeding movement of fish into and out of important habitats. Agency surveys indicate, for example, that at least 240 road culverts on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest are currently complete or partial barriers to fish movement, and the frequency of road crossing barriers on the Seeley Lake and Three Rivers Districts are even more severe. The result is reduced habitat availability for species such as Bull trout and cutthroat trout. The restoration projects called for in this legislation will improve habitat connectivity by removing roads and replacing or removing blocked culverts.

3. Engage communities in restoration.

The Forest Jobs and Recreation Act directs the Forest Service to use stewardship contracting to meet vegetation management goals, which ensures that the value of trees removed is invested back onto the same landscape in habitat restoration, elimination of pollution sources, protection of key habitats from livestock, or suppression of weeds on winter ranges, as well as improvement of recreational features such as trails used by hunters, anglers and other recreationists.

By focusing stewardship projects on previously developed landscapes with high densities of roads, the Forest Jobs and Recreation Act will help address impairments on landscapes that are prone to unnatural rates of erosion, and related effects such as exotic weed invasion, after fires. When large fires sweep through developed landscapes such as those on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest or the Three Rivers Ranger District, they significantly increase the risk of erosion from road systems after snowmelt or severe rainstorms, and subsequent colonization by exotic weeds. Similarly, post-fire storms can block road culverts with debris and mud, causing these structures to fail and resulting in channel scouring and large amounts of sediment entering into trout streams. Fire is a natural part of these forest systems. In fact, on undeveloped landscapes it can play a beneficial role, one that fish and wildlife have adapted to for eons. On densely roaded forests, the effects of fire can cause intense erosion, water quality degradation, and extirpation of local populations of fish and wildlife—not to mention the risk to nearby human communities.

Challenges to Meeting the Goals of the Legislation

Montana has long been ground-zero in the “timber wars.” It was there that the deleterious effects of roading and clear cutting practices on the Bitterroot National Forest were brought to national attention through the Bolle Report, a report whose findings helped to bring about the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA). NFMA mandated a detailed forest planning process that resulted in a recommitment by the Forest Service to the concept of multiple-use. Today, however, few would argue that the NFMA planning process as currently implemented is proving effective at unleashing the extraordinary talent and skill of Forest Service employees to help combat the effects of climate change on natural resources, fish and wildlife, and human communities.

In fire-adapted ecosystems that have missed fire return intervals, we do not have the luxury of hitting a reset button. Fire must be reintroduced to these systems, but it must be done safely. In many cases, we will require the services and skills of timber companies to thin areas before we can safely reintroduce fires. In other areas, we need them to thin around communities along the forest’s edge to help make them safer from the predicted increases in fire associated with climate change. No-one is talking about cutting old growth or entering pristine roadless areas. This bill is about land health and community safety and well-being. Given Montana’s role in the history of the Forest Service, it is fitting that a diverse array of stakeholders have come together in the state to provide an alternative path for managing public lands in the face of a changing climate.

None of the supporters of S. 1470 believe it an appropriate prescription for all of the National Forest System, but given the “paralysis,” as one former Chief put it, that the Forest Service finds itself mired in, we should be open to all good new ideas that help to bring people together for the betterment of the lands and waters that sustain us all.

The collaborative process undertaken by a broad range of partners has brought about a shared vision for forest management that can protect critical fish and wildlife habitat, maintain and enhance recreational opportunities, restore habitat by removing roads and blocked culverts, reduce the risk of unnaturally intense wildfire, and support good paying, family wage restoration jobs. That said, the bill does have critics. I will present a few of the main criticisms of S. 1470, attempt to answer them, and identify areas where people can work together to find solutions that meet the needs of the Forest Service, healthy ecosystems, and local communities.

Completing the restoration projects outlined in the bill will be expensive, and may cause the Forest Service to divert funding from other important needs. Rather than look at the Forest Service budget as a zero-sum game, where dollars are spread evenly across the landscape, our strong belief is that it is more prudent to apply resources where they are needed most, and importantly, *where the community capacity exists to ensure success.*

Few question the need of restoration treatments on the lands covered by S. 1470. The relationships and commitment to the type of collaborative process envisioned by Secretary Vilsack, however, exist in relatively few places today. As the diverse support base of this bill makes clear, the Kootenai, Lolo and Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forests are such places. These are the areas we should make our initial investments. And if legislation is required to kick start that era of collaborative stewardship, we think that type of congressional leadership appropriate.

Leaving some forests under-funded and unable to accomplish restoration goals because resources were diverted elsewhere is not in anyone's interest. It may be necessary to secure additional resources beyond the Forest Service's base budget through appropriations and stewardship contracting receipts to complete the projects outlined in the bill without taking resources away from other forests. Because of the tremendous benefits provided by the bill, especially its 670,000 acres of wilderness, such investments are cost-effective and worthwhile.

Legislating forest plans is inappropriate. TU's national staff and thousands of volunteers have participated in forest planning for decades. The Forest Service is an important and valued partner to TU and NWF. That said, the Forest Service planning process has not had a stellar record. The amendments to the 1982 planning regulations in 2000 were overturned by the Bush Administration, and subsequent efforts to revise the rules in 2005 and 2008 were deemed illegal by the courts. We plan to work with Secretary Vilsack and Chief Tidwell to make the latest attempt to revise the planning rules successful. In the meantime, we should not pass up opportunities to bring historic adversaries together, to protect crucial habitat, to restore degraded landscapes to better adapt to the effects of a changing climate, and to sustain local communities.

If we pass this legislation, we will have to do the same for forests across the country. From 1960-1989, National Forests produced 9-12 billion board feet of timber per year. Since that time, they have produced less than 2 billion per year. A recent survey of federal agencies found that morale in the Forest Service ranked 206 out of 216 agencies. Where once the agency's clear mission was to sell trees to build homes and provide other multiple uses, the agency is now struggling through its 19th year of transition.

Few wish to see the agency return to its timber cutting era. The nation, however, needs a strong Forest Service. We need its extraordinary knowledge and leadership to help human communities and fish and wildlife resources adapt to a changing climate. None of the organizations that support S. 1470 believes it is a panacea for the agency. We do, however, believe it vital to help foster the type of collaboration and negotiation that brought us here today. We do not want to see forest plans legislated across the country, but we do need to see models of collaborative stewardship enacted by the agency. For two decades, polarization and stalemate have defined National Forest management. S. 1470 could have a transformative effect within the Forest Service. By sanctioning this effort to bring together diverse interests to meet the needs of the land and nearby communities, Congress can send a clear message to the Forest Service that encourages the agency to lead, promote, or otherwise enable collaborative processes as standard operating procedure within the forest planning process.

We subscribe to Secretary Vilsack's vision of a new era of collaborative stewardship within the agency. S. 1470 will help provide one example of how that vision can be made into reality across the 191 million acre National Forest System.

Conclusion

The collaborative effort undertaken by local Montana groups is on the verge of overcoming years of controversy and delay to protect and restore Montana forests in ways that benefit fish and wildlife resources and local communities. There are challenges ahead, and to be certain, there may be ways to improve the bill, but S. 1470 represents a new way of doing business for the Forest Service, and we urge Congress to pass it.