



## ***Montana Legislature Threatens Montana Wilderness Study Areas***

*House Joint Resolution 9 Asks Congress to Remove Protection*

### **Headwaters Montana Opinion Piece**

March 1, 2017

When I was a kid and was learning to hunt, stealth and surprise often resulted in hunting success. But I also played team sports that taught me sportsmanship, and the importance of rules in competition. A little later on I learned that some adults don't like to lose and will throw the rule book and sportsmanship alike out the window just to get their way.

Something like this happened recently when the Montana House initiated asneak attack on Montana's Wilderness Study Areas. House Joint Resolution 9 (HJ 9) urges "the United States Congress to release certain wilderness study areas in Montana from inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System." Unbelievably, given the recent outpouring of public support at the Capitol for publicly owned lands, the House Natural Resource Committee passed this measure out of committee on a party line vote.



*You can [contact your legislators](#) and tell them what you think about HJ 9. Remember to be respectful.*

*(Image of winning concept for Montana's state capital submitted by George R. Mann in 1896.)*

For those of us who use Montana's vast public estate for hunting, fishing, hiking, horseback riding and other quiet, human (and real horse)-powered pursuits, HJ 9 came like a bolt out of the blue. The seven



*The Ten Lakes WSA - one of the seven Montana study areas on the chopping block in HJ 9.*

*(Photo: [www.gnam.photo](http://www.gnam.photo))*

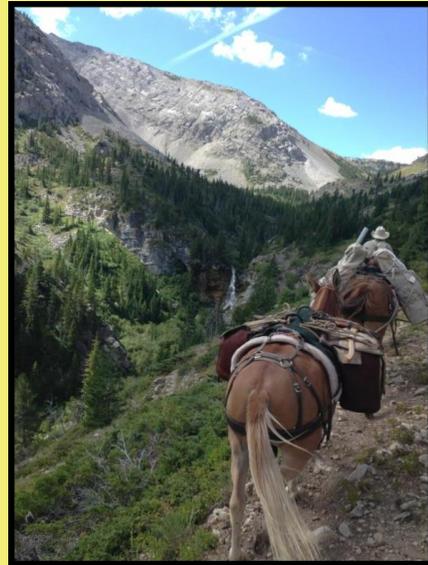
Montana Wilderness Study Areas (WSA) targeted by this resolution protect spectacular landscapes that conserve our wildlife, water, and recreation heritage.

HJ 9 makes a number of poorly informed claims as a rationale for releasing Wilderness Study Areas from protection. Let's look at one of them.

HJ 9 states, "WHEREAS, these lands are *de facto* wilderness in lieu of congressional

action, a situation that has resulted in a waste of forest assets, no management of public forests, and a harmful reduction in forest road construction and multiple-use access improvements."

Some folks obviously believe this. But the opposite is actually true. Montana's Wilderness Study Areas have protected our headwaters from damage due to forest road building, thus conserving one of Montana's most important assets: its water. For example, Flathead Lake remains one of the cleanest large lakes in the Lower 48 because most of its water comes from Wilderness areas and protected federal public lands like Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex.



*Wilderness Study Areas protect Montana's few remaining wildlands, and the quiet, human and horse-powered recreational opportunities found there. (Photo: Frank Vitale and Ellen Horowitz)*



*When roads get built in our National Forests, they can create big problems for clean water and fish. Here a culvert has blown out creating a silting problem and a huge cost to taxpayers for repair. (Photo: USFS).*

As for the "benefits" of forest road construction and "multiple-use access improvements," these too are imaginary. According to the US Forest Service, they can't maintain the roads they have, and have been closing roads in part to save us - the US taxpayer - money. Closing roads has a big upside: it improves security for wildlife and greatly improves water quality for fish and human consumption, values we can all appreciate.

Montana's Wilderness Study Act lands have conserved and protected Montana's assets such as water, wildlife and traditional recreation heritage. No wasted forest assets. Just conserved assets.

Bozeman representative Kerry White (HD 64) introduced HJ 9. And to tell you the truth, I feel like an elk that's just been poached out of season. Why? Because the bill was drafted on a Friday and the committee hearing was scheduled for the following Monday (on President's Day, a public holiday) with almost no public notice - on an issue of great statewide concern.

If you were hunting, this rushed process provides a good example of stealth and surprise.

But last I checked, the legislature is not a hunt. And the public, with its keen interest in this issue, isn't a deer or an elk.

Furthermore, the purpose of legislative committees is to collect and weigh public comment, determine the facts, and make informed decisions.

The public would trust its government more if elected representatives themselves were more respectful of the public's interest. Rep. Kerry has played foul of good sportsmanship. He may 'get his way' on HJ 9, and Montanans who love to hunt, fish, and recreate will pay the price.



*There's a lot of misinformation about Montana's WSAs. Opponents use unrelated arguments to promote what they really want: vehicular access to public lands. Motor vehicles displace wildlife as well as other recreation users. (Photo: [www.gnam.photo](http://www.gnam.photo))*



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