

RE: Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act

I'm writing these comments as someone who has spent a lot of time on the Rocky Mountain Front. In fact, it's my favorite place in the state of Montana. I've successfully hunted elk, deer and bighorn sheep on the RMF's public lands. I've fished the Sun River. I've also been involved helping a local landowner with a historic preservation project restoring old cabins in the Sun River Canyon area of the Front.

While the "Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act" would protect some small portions of the world-class Rocky Mountain Front in Montana as Wilderness, as currently written the RMFHA protects only a paltry sum as Wilderness while leaving too much of the federal public lands along the Rocky Mountain Front open to private grazing, motorized use, logging and other uses that compromise the ecological integrity of this American Serengeti.

As just one example, this bill locks-in public lands grazing across the Front by stating that "The secretary **shall** permit grazing" where it currently exists. Under existing law, grazing **may** be allowed to continue, but **it is not mandated** that it must be allowed to continue. The current language of the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act ties the hands of the Forest Service and it is worse than a bail-out, as it mandates the federal government to keep a private, commercial enterprise operating on public land, regardless of the ecological consequences, both now and into perpetuity. Clearly this language needs to be removed from the bill.

Our organization and others have tried to get the Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front to listen to our concerns and add more protections to the unparalleled wildlife habitat and wildlands on the Rocky Mountain Front, but, unfortunately, they seem more concerned with politics and appeasing the opinions of the anti-wilderness crowd.

Specifically, we'd urge people to contact Senator Walsh and request that the following changes and improvements (in addition to the grazing language mentioned above) be made to the RMFHA:

- The 67,000 acres of Wilderness designations along the Rocky Mountain Front proposed by Senator Walsh is a paltry sum, given the world-class, and largely unprotected wildlands and wildlife habitat, currently found along the Rocky Mountain Front. Even the Forest Service has recommended more Wilderness protections in their forest plans for the area than what Senator Walsh is proposing. Unfortunately, last a few years ago supporters of this bill dropped almost 30,000 acres of proposed Wilderness from the bill at the request of snowmobilers and those who oppose Wilderness. **I strongly urge you and Senator Walsh to include Wilderness protections for all the inventoried roadless wildlands along the Rocky Mountain Front and encourage other citizens to make the same request.**
- The Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act **preserves existing motorized, grazing and logging uses on 208,160 acres of public land**, designated as the "Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Management Area." Essentially what supporters of the bill have done is just renamed 208,160 of the Lewis and Clark National Forest to something nice to make it sound like on-the-ground management will change, but that's not the case. A serious question that should be posed to Senator Walsh and other supporters of his bill is: **How does preserving existing motorized use, grazing and logging on 208,160 acres along the Rocky Mountain Front actually result in eliminating the threats posed by motorized use, grazing and logging in these areas?**
- The language in the bill for maintaining existing facilities for livestock grazing is more liberal than previous Wilderness bills. The language incorporating State or local agencies for controlling fire, insects

and disease **promotes the trend toward devolution of federal public lands and is objectionable on that basis. Please ask Sen Walsh to remove this language from the RMFHA.**

• **Much of the noxious weed stuff in the bill is all about getting taxpayer funding for dropping tons of poisons on the ground while also mandating that all existing livestock grazing continue forever.** If this were an effective strategy there wouldn't be weeds in Montana. Given the complexities and unknowns of controlling weeds, especially with a rapidly changing climate and an escalating number of encroaching weed species, the called-for management strategy needs to focus on an assessment of existing weed infestations, the causes, potential controls, costs, likelihood of success, and clearly stated, measurable objectives to determine whether the controls are effective, and what will be done if they aren't or if the funding doesn't come through. **At a minimum, this section of the bill should call for the plan to be written by an independent team of scientists.**

As mentioned previously, over the years we've tried to get the Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front to listen to our concerns and add more protections to the unparalleled wildlife habitat and wildlands on the Rocky Mountain Front, but with no success.

The public may have noticed that these groups are incredibly well-funded and they use their resources to buy polling, pay for expensive ads to give the public the impression that everyone supports the RMFHA as currently written. That's just not true and there are essentially no opportunities to improve upon the bill given the current process, which is basically closed to those who don't agree with everything they already came up with.

We'd put forth that perhaps there is more to the proposed Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act than simply taking the talking points of supporters at face value. The Rocky Mountain Front means a lot of things to lots of people and we will likely only get one chance to protect this world-class area.

Thank you to those who speak up and ask for a stronger Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act.

Sincerely,

Matthew Koehler
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