Statement of
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Natural Resources Committee
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Concerning

H.R. 1975, Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to provide the Department's view on the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act.

The Department of Agriculture opposes H.R. 1975.

Title I of H.R. 1975 would add approximately 19,360,630 acres to the existing National Wilderness Preservation System in the states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington and Wyoming. Title II of the bill would designate approximately 8,471,252 acres as "biological connecting corridors", with some acres designated as wilderness and others subject to special corridor management requirements under title II. Title III would designate approximately 2,000 miles of rivers in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming as wild, scenic or recreational under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act across the 5 states.

Title IV of H.R. 1975 would also designate approximately 1,022,769 acres as wildland recovery areas and components of a National Wildland Recovery and Restoration System. Title IV would establish a National Wildland Recovery Corps to develop a wildland recovery plan for each area of the Recovery System and evaluate the success of the recovery efforts.

Title V of H.R. 1975 require the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to establish an interagency team to monitor, evaluate, and make recommendations to ensure long-term results required by the bill. Title V would require the team to develop a Geographic Information System for monitoring the Northern Rockies Bioregion and to assess the potential for facilitating wildlife movements across major highways and rail lines in the biological corridors established under title II of the bill.

Title V would also require a panel of independent scientists to evaluate and make management recommendations regarding National Forest System roadless areas located in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington and Wyoming that are greater than 1,000 acres and that are not designated as wilderness.

Under title V, Native Americans would continue to be provided non-exclusive access to protected areas under the bill for traditional cultural and religious purposes. Cooperative management agreements would be entered into with Indian tribes to assure protection of religious, burial and gathering sites and to work cooperatively on the management of all uses that impact Indian lands and people.

Title VI states that water rights secured by the United States in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Wyoming or Washington would not be relinquished or reduced by the bill.

There is current state-by-state work already being accomplished to achieve many of the objectives of H.R. 1975. We have testified in support of numerous specific Wilderness Area and Wild and Scenic River designations in the current Congress. Our planning process includes criteria for evaluating public lands for designation as wilderness and for identifying areas for specific management emphasis, such as for restoration and recovery, or habitat connectivity. Collaboration involves all interested parties who can assist us in finding balanced solutions to competing demands for natural resources. H.R. 1975 removes the collaborative public involvement process used in our land and resource management planning activities which creates two different processes for wilderness designation, one for National Forest System lands within the bill, and another for all other National Forest System lands.

H.R. 1975 would restrict the Secretary of Agriculture's management of significant portions of the renewable resources of the Northern Rocky Mountains. There are currently 35 million acres in 418 Forest Service-administered wilderness areas across the country. The wilderness designations in titles I and II of the bill would increase that amount significantly. H.R. 1975 proposes designation of some areas that are consistent with our forest plan recommendations and others that are not.

There are 101 designated Wild and Scenic Rivers already being managed in our current system, with more being analyzed each year. Removing the analysis of suitability for designation prior to designation of Wild and Scenic Rivers under the bill would be likely to create issues with private property owners, mining-claimants, timber companies, State resource agencies in relation to hunting access and opportunities, and permittees whose livelihood may depend on their use of National Forests.

H.R. 1975 does address Native American issues (uses, access, cooperative agreements, water rights, and treaty rights); however, issues such as the need for motorized access related to Native Americans' need to visit their heritage areas are not mentioned. Additionally, with new wilderness designations, there would be potential for increased recreational use by the public to areas of great Native American cultural significance, which should be considered on a case-by-case basis to protect these sites.

Many wildlife species benefit from providing large connected patches of habitat within and across landscapes, which H.R. 1975 seeks to accomplish. However, H.R. 1975 creates new categories of land management (i.e., biological connecting corridors and

special corridor management areas. The Forest Service has no experience with these new categories, and there may be unknown but significant impacts on the duties of the agency.

Also, without further and substantial examination by the agency, we cannot determine whether the actual land areas identified in H.R. 1975, those that would be converted from multiple use to wilderness designation, will meet the management and recovery goals for threatened and endangered species, and for other wildlife the agency is responsible for conserving. In addition, excluding management activities from large expanses of upland habitat in the Northern Rockies will not benefit many species that evolved in habitats sustained by periodic (and sometimes frequent) disturbances. Finally, the grizzly bear, gray wolf and bald eagle are just three (of the hundreds) of species the agency is responsible for conserving in the Northern Rockies. In 2007, the bald eagle was delisted nationwide, the Yellowstone grizzly bear population was delisted, and the population of gray wolves has steadily increased. The current configuration, use designation, and management of National Forest System lands in the Northern Rockies have contributed in part to these successes.

We have additional concerns, such as:

- Livestock grazing. Livestock grazing is not addressed in H.R. 1975. A large amount of land identified by this Act could impact permitted livestock grazing.

- Mining and oil and gas development. These activities are not addressed in H.R. 1975. Current mining claimants and oil and gas companies with permits to explore and drill could be impacted.

- Implementing titles II, IV, and V of H.R. 1975 would require a shift in management of our National Forests, redirecting Forest Service funding to the Northern Rockies at the expense of other Regions whose ecosystems are just as biologically diverse and important to the nation. Also, surveying new administrative boundaries for areas that would be designated as wilderness under the bill would redirect millions of dollars.

- There is potential for private in-holdings to be created by the bill. Enacting wilderness designations under H.R. 1975 could create numerous land acquisition issues that could take many years to be resolved.

We believe our process of ecosystem management is working towards the same benefits as this bill, without the adverse impacts such as designating large areas without public input. Also, our planning process considers these issues for areas on a forest-by-forest or state-by-state basis and is superior to the approach provided by H.R. 1975. Our planning process involves the public in determining the variety of issues related to a potential designation. Researching these specific issues identified through public involvement helps insure the best use of our natural resources.

This concludes my prepared statement and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.