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Opening Statement by
Representative Doc Hastings
Chairman, House Natural Resources Committee
Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Legislative Hearing on
H.R. 41, H.R. 113, H.R. 490, H.R. 608, H.R. 977, H.R. 1126, H.R. 1413 and H.R. 2050
October 25, 2011 10:00 a.m.

Thank you, Chairman Bishop. As we have a distinguished panel of our colleagues arrayed before us waiting to testify, I will be brief.

A wilderness area is the most restrictive land use designation that Congress can apply to our nation's lands – it greatly limits the American public's access to their lands. Please note that I specifically said that it is Congress, and only Congress, that has the authority to designate lands as wilderness. The Obama Administration attempted to bypass the clear letter of the law with its Wild Lands Secretarial Order, which was a backdoor attempt to create new wilderness by Executive fiat. They were forced by Act of Congress to abandon that effort.

Let me be clear, there are lands that should be managed as wilderness, and, in my view, most of those lands have already been designated. However, this hearing today demonstrates that Chairman Bishop and I are open to the possibility of appropriately designating new wilderness areas. That is not to say I am endorsing each of the bills before us today because each proposal must undergo careful, individual review – which this Committee is committed to undertaking.

Decisions on wilderness designations should be made on a case-by-case basis, be done in accordance with the Wilderness Act, be informed by broad local input so as to enjoy wide local support, and include a review of the potential designation's impact on the public's access, limitations on recreation, and effect on local economies and job creation activities.

To reiterate a point that Chairman Bishop made previously, the lands affected by each of the bills before the Subcommittee today are located within the congressional district represented by the bill's sponsor. There is a near zero percent chance that the Committee will act on or advance bills that seek to designate wilderness in a district or state that a Member isn't elected to represent. I have often said that I respect the knowledge and prerogative of a Member on proposals that affect their district, as they were elected to represent that district and know it best. However, this respect is not a blank check, and this Committee has a responsibility to review proposals carefully.

Let me also be clear that there are times when Congress must act to address situations that arise after the designation of a wilderness area. It takes an Act of Congress to create a wilderness area, and it requires an Act of Congress to fix or make necessary modest adjustments to an established wilderness area. It simply is not reasonable for advocates of establishing new wilderness to come to this Committee and argue that we cannot legislate reasonable, common sense modifications to prior designations that have arisen over time. Mr. Simpson of Idaho has just such a bill before us today, and I myself have introduced legislation to uphold promises made in prior designations. For new wilderness designations to advance and become law, proposals to make necessary adjustments to existing wilderness and to better manage our public lands as a whole will also need to advance. The Committee will review and judge each proposed wilderness bill on a case-by-case basis, but as Chairman, I don't intend to lose perspective on how best to manage the nation's lands as a whole.

The federal government already owns more lands than it can afford to properly manage. The deficit on maintaining and caring for our existing lands runs into the billions of dollars. We must make thoughtful and careful land-use decisions that reflect our country's current economic situation, the need to keep our lands healthy, and the importance of keeping public lands as open to the American public as possible for multiple-use purposes.