

By Senator John Barrasso & Representative McCarthy May 31, 2011 [Link](#)

Over the past three decades, our ability to enjoy our national resources has been constrained by Congress' failure to take action on recommendations to open up millions of acres of public land for increased use and recreation.

Most public lands across the country are managed for "multiple use," which means that ranching, grazing, recreation, tourism and energy exploration can occur there. These decisions are almost always made at the local level because those who live, work and recreate in and around public lands know best how to manage them.

There are some areas across the United States that have characteristics deserving of special preservation. In order to protect these specific areas, Congress has designated them "wilderness areas," and most activities are restricted or eliminated. However, there are tens of millions of acres across the United States that do not have these special characteristics but are essentially being treated as if they did. Let us explain.

In 1976, Congress promised to make a choice about which public lands should have special preservation, directing the Bureau of Land Management to conduct a study to determine which lands were suitable for wilderness designations and which were not. The BLM recommended 6.7 million acres as not suitable. However, because Congress has not acted on these recommendations, they continue to be treated essentially as if they were wilderness areas. Separately, in 1979 the U.S. Forest Service inventoried their Inventoried Roadless Areas and determined that 36 million acres were not suitable for wilderness; however, public access and use remain severely restricted.

Congress' lax approach to these recommendations means that millions of acres of public land across our country remain in limbo; off-limits to multiple use and set apart from the local planning process.

That's why we introduced the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act. Our legislation would end the cycle of indefinite wilderness review and bring nearly 43 million acres of public lands out

of purgatory. Specifically, the BLM and Forest Service lands specified above would be released from de facto wilderness management and opened up for multiple use.

Our legislation does not direct what type of activities must occur on these lands. Rather, it would return management of these lands to the local Americans who live on and around them and provide them the flexibility to manage them for a multitude of activities.

In Wyoming, land that remains locked up by Washington is being ravaged by mountain pine beetles. The infestation has devastated the area, weakening the recreational and environmental value of the land. Since this land remains on Washington's "do not touch" list, local land managers aren't able to take steps necessary to address the problem.

In California, more than 3 million acres, including tens of thousands in the 22nd district, remain under lock and key unnecessarily. This means many rural and outlying communities that depend on tourism and recreation cannot maximize the potential of the public lands in their area. It also makes it harder for our firefighters to battle wildfires, which can devastate tens of thousands of acres of forest land and release thousands of tons of pollution into the air.

Our bill will face strong opposition from environmental extremists and their friends in the administration. But the bottom line is that this legislation is just common sense. It simply acts on the recommendations of the agencies that manage these lands and allows the American people to take advantage of their own land.

It's long past time for Congress to act. Land that isn't Congressionally recognized as "wilderness," as well as deemed unsuitable for a wilderness designation by the very agencies that manage them, should be opened up for public use and enjoyment. Washington promised to make this choice more than 30 years ago. The Code of the West says, "When you make a promise, keep it." Washington might not have read the Code of the West, but we have, and we're going to hold Washington to its promises. This land is the people's land. It does not belong to the bureaucrats in Washington.