

Our future depends on roadless public lands: Rehberg should pull support from short-sighted legislation

Think of your favorite place in Montana. What comes to mind? It could be a secluded stream you return to every summer for the fat trout that swim in its pools, or the steep mountainside that gives you a sweeping view of the craggy peaks across the valley. Perhaps it's a quiet meadow you've hiked in two hours to reach so that you could find the elk that you'll shoot to stock your freezer for the winter. Would any of these places be the same with a road running through it?

We are students at the University of Montana and all 10 of us are pursuing different majors. We do, however, have one thing in common: we think the quality of our future depends upon roadless public lands. That's why we're pretty alarmed by HR 1581, the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act. Introduced by Calif. Rep. Kevin McCarthy and co-sponsored by Rep. Dennis Rehberg, R-Mont., the bill would remove all protection from roughly 55 million acres across the nation - with most of that land concentrated in Idaho and Montana. When 74 percent of Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands are already roaded, those 55 million acres are quite a lot to ask for. As shown by the flurry of commentary seen in the media of late, we're not the only ones skeptical about this.

On the surface, the debate around the bill has become about access. The main point, we think, is missing from these arguments. We should not be asking whether HR 1581 would harm or help access to the 5.5 million acres of roadless land and wilderness study areas in Montana. Instead, we should be asking ourselves where people will be when there is nothing left to access at all.

More specifically, where will we, the youth of this great state, be? Where will our children be? What will happen to our billion-dollar tourism economy and the outdoor jobs that it supports? When our derelict, dust-choked streams can no longer support fish and when the animals we used to hunt have fled from fragmented landscapes, the question will be not whether we have access to a place but whether it is a place we'd want to access at all.

Although a roaded landscape filled with mines and oil wells might give us money for a short while, it will keep us from sustaining our livelihoods in the long run. Those sources of income are short-lived. A Montana where all land is open to development is, in the end, a Montana where all land has been stripped of everything we love about it. That is not a Montana that we would ever like to see, but that is also the Montana that could come to exist if those supporting HR 1581 have their way.

Montana's a state that likes to determine its own future. Allowing a bill written by a California representative to influence what will happen to Montana land and, thus, Montanans themselves, should be positively repellent to the hardy citizens of our state - especially considering the fact that our own representative did not consult with us once about his signing on as a co-sponsor.

There has yet to be a single collaborative meeting about releasing already public land to be potentially ruined for local benefit.

There's a strong history of public involvement in wilderness bills, especially in Montana, but there has yet to be any in HR 1581. The majority of the input has been from congressmen in D.C., few of whom have ever visited the myriad landscapes threatened by this proposal and all of whom will probably never live to see the landscapes of this nation ruined by ignorance and greed.

These lands are an investment in our future that we cannot afford to squander. As students from a range of backgrounds who will depend on that investment for our own livelihoods, we call on Rehberg to hold public meetings across the state, and to pull his support for this short-sighted and ill-conceived legislation until the people he represents have had their say. As the inheritors of Montana's public lands legacy, we demand a seat at the table.

This opinion is signed by University of Montana students Emily Downing (journalism), Kip Beckwith (resource conservation), Neil Bennet (mathematics), Willow Coefield (political science), Dave Wise (environmental studies), Shannon Hawthorne (nature-based tourism), Matthew Dunkle (aquatic wildland restoration and environmental studies), Harper Kaufman (religious studies), Chris Freistadt (forestry), and Dylan Desrosier (Native American studies and environmental studies).

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