

## After voting for bill allowing bikes in the wilderness, Gianforte says he no longer supports it



After earlier voting for a bill that would allow bikes in wilderness areas, Montana's lone congressman, Republican Greg Gianforte, says his views have changed and he no longer supports the legislation.

"I've spent a lot of time in the backcountry, and I've always believed that travel in the backcountry should be foot or horseback," he said Monday.

Late last year, a U.S. House committee approved, along with Gianforte's support, House Resolution 1349. The resolution, brought by Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Calif., would amend the 1964 Wilderness Act to "to permit the use of bicycles, strollers and other human-powered wheeled implements, and motorized and non-motorized wheelchairs in wilderness acres."

The legislation would not open all wilderness trails to bikes but would rather leave the decision up to local officials. Current regulations prohibit bikes, based on language in the Wilderness Act prohibiting mechanical transport.

The legislation drew debate on two main fronts. The first was an ongoing disagreement over allowing mountain bikes on wilderness trails. The second came from criticism over the wheelchair portion of the bill, as wheelchair access in wilderness is protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act and subsequent regulations.

Gianforte had cited concerns that wheelchair protections were not uniformly enforced and reiterated Monday that ADA compliance should be uniform. He believed the bill attempted to bring some clarity to ADA compliance, but "in hindsight it went too far."

"My understanding going into this vote on 1349 was this was an attempt to clarify the Wilderness Act in some corner cases that I didn't really believe applied to Montana," he said.

"I've never wanted to see bikes in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, and I honestly I didn't expect that to happen because I didn't think Montanans would support it."

Gianforte first announced his opposition to the bill a couple of weeks ago at the Montana Outfitters and Guides Association annual meeting. He says he heard from outfitters and other interest groups, which helped him crystalize his views.

Gianforte says the bill is unlikely to come to the House floor for a vote but would vote against it given the opportunity.

Mack Long, national director of Montana Backcountry Horsemen and heading the Professional Wilderness Outfitters Association, said opposition to allowing bikes in wilderness came mainly from concerns about safety, and outfitters expressed these concerns to Gianforte.

“Neither group is opposed to having bikes on trails, but we are concerned from a safety standpoint with blind corners with having a bike going 30 miles per hour meeting a horse going 3 miles per hour,” he said.

Gabriel Furshong, deputy director of the Montana Wilderness Association, said the bill pitted recreationists against each other and called the wheelchair portion unnecessary given the ADA.

“First, we would encourage (Gianforte) to check with his constituents before deciding to (support) legislation, but secondly, he got this right in the end,” he said. “It was the right thing to do to withdraw his support.”

MWA supports allowing wheelchairs in wilderness, Furshong added, and bike trails in many places outside of wilderness.

While bike advocates the International Mountain Bicycling Association opposes allowing bikes in wilderness, other groups have advocated for it and support HR 1349.

A national mountain biking group called Sustainable Trails Coalition has been one of the primary drivers behind the bill. Its president, Ted Stroll, pins the bill in part on documents he believes show that the Wilderness Act only meant to prohibit motorized travel, and that bikes should be allowed in many areas.

“It is disturbing,” he said of Gianforte’s withdraw of support.

Stroll is critical of outfitters using wilderness as a “taxpayer funded” source of income and argues that the environmental impact of horses and mules is greater than that of bikes.

“These outfitters charge a lot of money and take these pack strings into the wilderness that are tremendously destructive,” he said.

When asked why, if bike prohibitions are inconsistent with the Congressional intent of the Wilderness Act he does not simply file a lawsuit, Stroll says that lawsuits are inherently slow, inconsistent and expensive.

“We feel like there's more certainty and it’s quicker, even as paralyzed and polarized as Congress is, we have a better chance of prevailing in Congress quicker,” he said.

Stroll maintains that allowing bikes would contribute to local economies and HR 1349 puts bikes on the same plane as camping, hunting and horseback riding.