Giving Away Washington's Great Outdoors?

Local News

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SEATTLE, Wash. - It's being dubbed "The Great Outdoors Giveaway," legislation that would remove federal environmental protections from 60 million acres of public land, with more than two million acres of that total in Washington. The land is now U.S. Forest Service roadless areas and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wilderness study areas, but it would be open to development and off-road vehicle use.

Conservation and sportsmen's groups will testify in a U.S. House committee today about the need for middle ground, land with some protections, but accessible for recreation and not as restricted as federal wilderness. That's the view of Tom O'Keefe, Pacific Northwest stewardship director for *American Whitewater*.

"One of the things I do not understand about this legislation is that it basically takes us back to the binary management framework, where we have wilderness areas on one hand, and then areas that are open for multiple use and development and extractive industries on the other hand."

Those in favor of the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act say the government has tied up land that could otherwise be used to create jobs.

If it passes, as little as 12 percent of Forest Service and BLM lands would be off-limits to developers. It would also prohibit the BLM from identifying any new areas as potential wilderness.

The plan doesn't sit well with sportsmen, according to Mike Beagle, co-founder of *Backcountry Hunters and Anglers*. He says an expanse of wild country ensures the health of wildlife populations.

"Having that big ground, that's really important for bighorn sheep, mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk. We need those special places intact, whether it's calving for elk, fawning for mule deer, antler growth, horn growth."

Some are reminding Congress that extractive industries aren't the only ones interested in using public lands - that recreation is a $730 billion annual business and deserves as much consideration as mining and petroleum.

The bills before Congress are HR 1581 and S 1087.