

Wild Sky National Recreation Area: A Reasonable Alternative to Wilderness Designation

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by Eric Montague, Director, Center for Environmental Policy

Vast expanses of undeveloped federal lands make up much of the Cascade mountain range. Among these areas are some of the most picturesque expanses of wilderness in the lower 48 states. Under the Wilderness Act of 1964, more than four million acres of federal lands in Washington are designated as wilderness areas and protected from development and human encroachment. The wilderness designation is designed to prohibit most human activity, particularly those activities that require the use of machines like logging, mining and road building, in the nation's wild, untouched natural areas.

Supporters of what is called the Wild Sky Wilderness Area have proposed designating more than 100,000 acres of federal land in the Skykomish River basin north of Highway 2 as federally protected wilderness. This popular recreation area offers many environmental, recreational and economic benefits to the region, and certainly deserves special protection, but the implications of a wilderness designation for the full 106,000 acres deserves a thorough review before any action is taken.

History of the Wild Sky Region

Proponents of federal wilderness designation have advocated for the Wild Sky proposal, in one form or another, for over 30 years. In 1973, the Forest Service conducted its first study of existing roadless regions to determine if they should be

included in the newly designated system of wilderness areas. This study, called the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE), did not recommend most of the lands in the current Wild Sky proposal be considered for wilderness designation.

Advocate groups appealed the RARE study criteria. The result was a more thorough federal examination of roadless areas based on a more inclusive standard for qualifying wilderness areas. This follow-up study, labeled RARE II, was completed in 1979. Under the more flexible criteria the Wild Sky region still failed to win support for wilderness designation. Due to the existence of roads and visible evidence of past mining and timber harvest, federal officials did not feel the area fit the statutory definition of wilderness.

Congress was not averse to assigning wilderness designation to Washington lands. In 1984 Congress enacted the Washington Wilderness Act of 1984 (PL 98-339) that designated much of the central Cascades (Henry M Jackson, Boulder River and Glacier Peak) for inclusion in the wilderness system complementing the existing Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area. Congress in that 1984 Act declared that other roadless areas, including the Wild Sky proposal, should only be considered for the wilderness option when the Forest Service revises the next series of forest management plans. Absent a proposal from the Forest Service that such area be designated for wilderness, Congress

decided that such roadless areas should be managed for multiple uses. Federal authorities determined that Wild Sky fails to meet fundamental criteria established under the Wilderness Act of 1964, specifically, an absence of previous human activities like mining, logging and road building.

Wilderness Remains Protected

Under current law, federal officials have not listed the Wild Sky lands as wilderness. Proponents of the designation contend that the restrictive provisions of a federal wilderness are necessary to protect natural features and recreational values from political whims and special interest pressures.

Others propose a less restrictive approach that has proven successful in similar regions. With designation as a National Recreation Area (NRA), the Wild Sky area would remain free of most human development, but the use of machinery for trail and facility maintenance and preventing wildfires would not be prohibited. This approach avoids the blunt instrument of wilderness designation, but still preserves this popular recreation area for future generations.

When the use of mechanized equipment is prohibited, as it would be if Wild Sky were to be designated wilderness, it may well prove to be too expensive to rebuild damaged trail systems using hand tools. Already many of our National Parks and wilderness areas are saddled with millions of dollars of overdue trail and facility maintenance projects. And as the popularity of outdoor recreation continues to grow, the cost of maintaining facilities and upgrading more popular destinations will only continue to increase.

National Recreation Area (NRA)

Designation as an NRA offers a more reasonable preservation alternative for the Wild Sky area - one that offers similar protections from development and commercial logging, but is better suited to the multiple uses of the area. Such designation imposes similar restrictions on road construction, mining and timber removal but better accommodates Wild Sky proponents preferred uses, such as angling, hiking, rafting, kayaking, mountain climbing, backcountry camping, horseback packing, wildlife watching and cross-country skiing.

The choice faced by federal lawmakers as they consider the proposed Wild Sky Wilderness Area is a not a choice between extractive resource activity and permanent protection of natural systems. The choice is between granting federal scientists and land managers the flexibility to manage 106,000 acres of federal land for the benefit of present and future generations, and restricting most human activity - even preservation activity - from the area. With designation as a NRA, federal land managers can better address the needs of the forest while ensuring environmental amenities are protected for future generations. NRA designations apply to popular recreation lands surrounding Ross Lake and within the headwaters of Lake Chelan and should apply just as well to federal lands near Index.

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