

Senator Steve Daines: The Protect Public Use of Public Lands Act (S. 2206)

“Forty years of D.C. paralysis has frozen access and use of our public lands and it’s time to put these lands back in the hands of Montanans.” – U.S. Senator Steve Daines

Senator Steve Daines has introduced legislation, the Protect Public Use of Public Lands Act (S. 2206), to protect public access and use of Montana’s public lands by implementing the Forest Service’s recommendation to release 449,500 acres of Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) in Montana.

What is a Wilderness Study Area (WSA)?

- WSAs are portions of U.S. Forest Service (USFS) or Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands that were created by Congress so that the USFS or BLM could evaluate their suitability for Wilderness.
- In 1977, Congress set aside about 973,000 USFS acres in Montana as WSAs and required the USFS to maintain then-existing uses of the land (recreation trails for biking, hiking, motorized use, other outdoor recreation, grazing, etc.) and report back within five years so that Congress could act on their recommendations.
- The USFS found the WSA lands included in S. 2206 unsuitable for Wilderness but Congress failed to act on that recommendation and release the lands back to Montanans. Since then, many of the existing uses have diminished.
- Similarly, since 1976, 47 Bureau of Land Management (BLM) WSAs have been created, encompassing over 430,000 acres. S. 2206 does not currently address any BLM WSAs in Montana.
- Forty years later – over one million BLM and USFS acres in Montana remain in limbo and continue to restrict access. Only about 153,000 USFS and BLM WSA acres in Montana have ever been released.

What were the wilderness studies supposed to do?

Wilderness studies were meant to evaluate the suitability for Wilderness and deem study acres as either suitable for Wilderness or not.

How does the Protect Public Use of Public Lands Act fix the problem?

Daines’ bill releases 449,500 of locked up USFS WSA lands, allowing more Montanans to access their land, first governed by other existing rules like the Roadless Rule, the Endangered Species Act, existing forest and travel management plans, and allowing for a robust public planning process to unfold. Note, S. 2206 still leaves more than 647,000 acres of WSAs in Montana untouched.

Why weren’t all Montana WSAs included in the bill?

S. 2206 only includes WSAs that meet two criteria as established by Senator Daines. First, the USFS determined they were not suitable for Wilderness in a final plan and second, they have strong local support for release, including from local elected officials

like County Commissions and the Montana State Legislature, as well as recreation, sportsmen and wildlife groups. All WSAs included in the bill had to meet both criteria – if they didn't, they were not included.

What WSAs were included?

- West Pioneer Wilderness Study Areas
- Sapphire Wilderness Study Area
- Middle Fork Judith Wilderness Study Area
- Big Snowies Wilderness Study Area
- A portion of the Blue Joint Wilderness Study Area

To view a map of the WSAs included in the bill, click [HERE](#).

Who supports the Protect Public Use of Public Lands Act?

Support includes the Montana Legislature, local community, recreation, sportsmen and wildlife groups and elected county commissioners.

To see list of support groups, click [HERE](#).

To see statements of support, click [HERE](#).

To see letters of support, click [HERE](#).

What does passage of the Protect Public Use of Public Lands Act mean?

Passage of the bill does not automatically authorize any uses across the five WSAs. It simply opens up the planning process for public comment. In fact, protections like the Roadless Rule, the Endangered Species Act and existing forest and travel management plans remain intact.