



Protecting Montana's wildlife,
land, waters and hunting & fishing
heritage for future generations.

December 5, 2017

The Honorable Greg Gianforte
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Re: H.R. 1349

Dear Representative Gianforte:

The Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF) is Montana's oldest and largest wildlife conservation organization. Our members include thousands of Montanans and people all over the nation who hunt, fish, and value Montana's natural lands, clean waters, and abundant wildlife.

We oppose H.R. 1349, a bill to amend the Wilderness Act to allow "the use of motorized wheelchairs, non-motorized wheel-chairs, non-motorized bicycles, strollers, wheelbarrows, survey wheels, measuring wheels, or game carts within any wilderness area." This bill represents an unnecessary, ineffective, and divisive rewrite of one of our most important land management laws.

The Wilderness Act plays an essential role in protecting security habitat for wildlife and public opportunity for backcountry hunting, angling, and other recreation. By prohibiting mechanized transportation, resource extraction, and commercial activity, the Wilderness Act ensures that a small portion of the public land base will remain undeveloped and in a primarily natural state. Wilderness areas are designated after lengthy deliberative processes that include extensive review by agency managers, public input, and ultimately congressional approval. As a result, only about 3.75 percent of Montana's public lands are designated as wilderness.

The vast majority of public lands in Montana and nationwide are managed as multiple use lands, with plenty of opportunity for access by bicycles and other mechanized modes of transportation. In fact, the large extent to which public lands and trails are open to bicycle use is reflected in the generally positive opinion that bicyclists make about access. According to a 2016 survey of the members of the International Mountain Bike Association (IMBA), 74 percent of IMBA members reported that mountain bike trail access where they live has increased, with another 18 percent reporting that access has remained the same.

Where site-specific conflicts about bicycling may occur, they are generally not the result of wilderness designation. On lands managed by the US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and National Park Service, decisions about different trail uses are allocated through travel management and other planning processes. Altering the Wilderness Act will do

nothing to address bicycle access issues that are defined by these multiple land use planning processes.

Finally, although H.R. 1349 references wheelchairs, they have been allowed in Wilderness Areas since enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. The ADA specifically provides that "nothing in the Wilderness Act (16 U.S.C. 1131 et seq.) is to be construed as prohibiting the use of a wheelchair in a wilderness area by an individual whose disability requires use of a wheelchair" (42 USC 12207).

Instead of a top-down rewrite of the Wilderness Act, the best way to balance competing public land uses is through local collaboration that brings stakeholders together to identify areas appropriate for more intensive recreation, areas that need active forest management, and areas that should be designated wilderness. As you know, Montana has many examples of such efforts, including the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project, the Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Coalition, and the Whitefish Range Partnership. Supporting these efforts will yield far better results on the ground in Montana than one-size-fits-all policies written in Washington.

At a time when Americans should be coming together to find common ground on land management, H.R. 1349 is an unnecessary and divisive distraction. We urge you to oppose this bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dave Chadwick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dave Chadwick
Executive Director