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April 27, 2012

Mr. William Metz
Forest Supervisor, Cleveland National Forest
U.S. Forest Service
10845 Rancho Bernardo Rd, Suite 200
San Diego, CA 92127-2107

Dear Supervisor Metz:

I am in receipt of your April 16 letter informing me that the Southern California National Forests are in the planning stages of amending its Land Management Plan (LMP) with regard to Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) as a result of a legalized settlement agreement with an environmental interest group. Specifically, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) agreed to propose and recommend additional areas for wilderness designation within the Angeles, Cleveland, Los Padres and San Bernardino National Forests that total 80,000 acres. I am absolutely opposed to this action and believe it would be in the best interests of the forest lands, and the American public to which they belong, that your offices rescind this course of action and enter into new discussions with this group with the goal of obtaining a more reasoned solution.

As you know, this designation is the strictest of those provided through the Wilderness Act and the National Wilderness Preservation System established by Congress. I have made my position on this issue very clear in the past and will do so again. Since 1964, over 110 million acres of federal lands in 759 different areas have been designated as wilderness, far beyond original scope or legislative intent. In California alone, there are already 14 million acres of wilderness lands and over 300 roadless areas totaling 7.4 million acres that contain all of the attributes of potential candidates for future wilderness designations. Despite these massive numbers, efforts are consistently being made in Congress to create additional designations, most recently the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, P.L. 111-11, which designated over two million acres of wilderness in various locales.

While the statute benignly states that this designation prohibits commercial activities, motorized access, and roads, structures, and facilities in these areas, what it does not articulate is adverse affects this action has on local industry, recreation and utilization by the public, including interests that are seeking to protect the environment and wildlife. For example, I have had personal interaction with a local conservation group in Imperial County that was prohibited to utilize motorized vehicles to resupply pre-existing watering holes for endangered bighorn sheep simply because these animals existed on wilderness lands. In other words, the designation of the lands on which these creatures resided were deemed more valuable than the well-being and benefit of the endangered animals themselves.

There is an added element that is unique to the region of Southern California that also must be addressed; national and border security. There are currently 15 designated wilderness areas located within 20 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border. Testifying before Congress, representatives from the Departments of Homeland Security, Interior, and Agriculture continuously state their cooperation and commitment to balancing federal law enforcement with land stewardship practices. At the same time, however, evidence has been provided demonstrating how the constraints on access and how the requirements for coordination have seriously hindered efforts to protect U.S. borders. The Government Accountability Office produced two reports in 2010 indicating that delays and restrictions in border security operations have occurred as a result of the restrictions associated with the land management policy for wilderness designated areas.

Let me be clear, I support protecting our environment for present and future generations. This effort, however, must be balanced with a land management policy that exercises common sense and flexibility to obtain these important goals. I understand that this action being considered would not in itself establish a wilderness designation on these areas. This recommendation by the USFS on these IRAs would, however, substantively accelerate this process for further action by Congress and, in my opinion, do nothing more than placate to the continuing demands of extreme environmental groups whose agendas are based more on political gains than conservation. These additional land designations will only serve to encourage similar settlements in the future, making a larger portion of our local forest resources less accessible to those in our community. It is for this reason that I again respectfully request that your office, and those of your counterparts, remove wilderness designations as a viable option and consider alternative approaches to amend the LMP to address the concerns of this and other environmental groups.

Supervisor Metz, I appreciate your allowing me the opportunity to provide your office with my comments on this important matter and look forward to discussing it more with you in the future. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me directly, or have your staff contact Michael Harrison in my office at (619) 448-5201.

With best wishes.

Sincerely,



Duncan Hunter
Member of Congress

DH/mrh

Cc: Supervisor Thomas Contreras, Angeles National Forest
Supervisor Peggy Hernandez, Los Padres National Forest
Supervisor Jody Noiron, San Bernardino National Forest