

**Testimony in support of
S. 1774, the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act**

**Submitted by Dusty Crary before the
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests**

March 22nd, 2012

Chairman Wyden, Ranking Member Barrasso, and members of the subcommittee:

Good afternoon, my name is Dusty Crary. I am a rancher and outfitter from Choteau, MT. Along with my wife Danelle and three children, we operate Four Seasons Cattle and a backcountry outfitting business. I am also a member of the Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front. This working group developed the proposal resulting in S.1774. I want to thank the chairman and ranking member for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to testify before the subcommittee. I also want to thank Senator Baucus for his commitment to preserving this special place.

The Rocky Mountain Front (RMF) rises abruptly from the mixed grass prairies of North Central MT to take its place on the eastern edge of the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem. The outer peaks of the Front are the gateway and guardians of that celebrated centerpiece of North American conservation, the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex.

There are 3 components to this legislation. The **first** would be an addition of 67,000 acres of designated Wilderness. These parcels are within USFS recommended wilderness lands and adjoin current Wilderness boundaries. Currently the USFS manages about 93,000 acres along the RMF for its wilderness characteristics. After much debate and discussion amongst our working group, all of whom are intimately familiar with the landscape, we arrived at the boundaries as shown. We feel these parcels selected strike a good balance, and are an appropriate addition to the Bob Marshall Complex. In the case of each of the five proposed Wilderness additions, we took a hard look at how people were using the land. For example, at the southern end of the Front there are several outfitters who routinely lead trail rides into these areas and rely on chainsaws to clear deadfall each spring. When we were working on the boundaries we talked to all the guides and livestock operators in advance to make sure that the Heritage Act would not hurt their ability to make a living off the land. The final version of the Heritage Act is better because of the input from the folks on the Front.

Although an iconic American land use designation with a clear template to follow, we knew that big “W”, wilderness, was not a good fit for much of the land within the proposal. In fact, it is this land that lies between wilderness and private land that has been the focus of our efforts. This multiple-use land has provided firewood cutting, livestock grazing, and recreational opportunities for local residents and visitors from afar. In a survey conducted in 2002, respondents from Teton County differed on their opinions

of wilderness, motorized use, and oil & gas development, but replied that they like the Front just the way it is. Our aim was to develop a proposal that does just that, *keeps the Front the way it is*. What we arrived at is the 2nd part of this bill, the Conservation Management Area (CMA). The CMA would cover the remaining, non-wilderness federal lands, comprising 208,000 acres. The CMA is flexible enough to allow the FS and BLM to effectively manage wildfire, grazing and recreational use and strong enough to protect the character of the land for future generations.

The private ranchlands adjacent to the federal lands are one of the most vital ecological aspects of the front. These large blocks of private land provide critical habitat and winter range for much of the wildlife in this area. This interface has been referred to as the American Serengeti and still has the complete compliment of species that were here when the Corps of Discovery traversed the area in 1805 and 1806, including bison, although in private herds. The riparian corridors hold the largest concentrations of Grizzly Bears in the lower 48. These ranches are not only ecologically crucial; they are culturally significant to the fabric of the region. Federal land grazing is an important element to many of these multi-generational operations. Protecting these grazing permits has been *the* highest priority throughout this entire process. It is paramount to the integrity of the entire system that these large ranches remain intact. Keeping them economically viable is the best way to insure that. This legislation will in no way jeopardize any grazing permit and in fact provides additional language emphasizing their importance and safeguarding their continued use. Many of these ranches are under conservation easement with various agencies and conservation organizations and there is strong interest to do easements among additional operations. With the addition of the Conservation Management Area, the integrity of the entire system would be insured. The CMA provides crucial balance that allows for the continuation of historical uses and protection for the future.

Invasive species is an oft heard term these days. It seems every region has an invasive plant or animal to deal with. Noxious weeds, primarily Spotted Knapweed and Leafy Spurge, are two invasives that threaten the RMF. Native plant communities, wildlife, and agricultural production are all at risk from these invaders. Fortunately there is a high level of commitment from landowners, agencies, and NGO's currently in place to contain and reduce infestations on state and private lands. The **third** leg of this legislation would build on this existing foundation to ramp up the efforts to control noxious weeds on federal lands. We can have the best land protection in place but that alone is insufficient if noxious weeds create a monoculture across the landscape. Language in the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act (RMFHA) will direct the Forest Service and BLM to develop a comprehensive weed management plan with the input of private landowners, tribal members and the general public. To protect property values, wildlife habitat and water quality, we need the FS and the BLM to be fully committed to fighting noxious weeds on public lands.

In closing I would like to re-emphasize the intent of the Coalition to Protect the Rocky Mountain Front. This legislation was not generated at the federal level and sent down for comment. If ever there was a start from scratch, kitchen table proposal, this is it. We are

a small group of ordinary citizens who are passionate about our landscape and have a thorough understanding of why it is important to keep it intact. And like most everyone else, we like it the way it is. We just realize that unless you put it in writing there is no guarantee that it will stay the same. We wanted this legislation to do just what it needs to and not one thing more. And that quite simply is the goal of the RMFHA. It is an insurance policy for the future. My kids are the fifth generation of Crarys growing and working on the ranch my great grandfather started. This is our Homeland Security Bill, and it is our hope that you will give the RMFHA your favorable consideration.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.