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Forest Service Wilderness Management Funding

Statement of
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Resources, Community, and Economic
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Before the
Subcommittee on National Parks and
Public Lands
Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs
House of Representatives



Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss the results to date of GAO's review of the funding received by the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service for managing wilderness areas. A report on this ongoing review, undertaken at your request, will be issued to you later this year.

At this point in our work we have two observations:

- Of the amounts designated by the Appropriations Committees for wilderness management for the combined fiscal years 1988, 1989, and 1990, approximately 37 percent was reprogrammed¹ to other programs, including recreation management and cultural resource management.

- Of the remaining 63 percent designated for wilderness management for the 3 fiscal years, only 63 percent trickled down to the Forest Service's district offices where the day-to-day management of wilderness areas occurs; the other 37 percent was used for program expenses at other organizational levels within the Forest Service, primarily for salaries and administrative costs.

BACKGROUND

In our 1989 report² on Forest Service wilderness areas, we found that funding for many aspects of wilderness management was insufficient, according to Forest Service wilderness managers. These aspects included the monitoring of wilderness area

¹Reprogramming is the shifting of funds from one purpose to another purpose within an appropriation.

²Wilderness Preservation: Problems in Some National Forests Should Be Addressed (GAO/RCED-89-202, Sept. 26, 1989).

conditions, the cleaning of campsites, and the education of the public on proper behavior in the wilderness. Wilderness managers also reported that staffing was a high priority need.

To improve overall wilderness conditions, the amounts designated for wilderness management were substantially increased in recent years: \$12.6 million in fiscal year 1988, \$14.7 million in fiscal year 1989, \$17.6 million in fiscal year 1990, and \$22.6 million in fiscal year 1991--representing a 79-percent increase over this period. Current House Appropriations Committee procedures applicable to programs for which funds have been specifically designated in the Appropriations Committees' reports, including wilderness management, require that any proposed reprogramming of these funds that exceeds \$250,000 annually or results in an increase or decrease of more than 10 percent annually to a program must receive prior Committee approval.³ Conversely, the Forest Service's Program Development and Budget Handbook, as amended in February 1988, includes no such requirement.

SIGNIFICANT REPROGRAMMING OF ANNUAL
WILDERNESS FUNDS HAS OCCURRED
WITHOUT COMMITTEE APPROVAL

For budgetary purposes, wilderness management is combined with recreation management and cultural resource management under the Forest Service's recreation uses budget activity.⁴ In recent years, the Forest Service has reprogrammed funds designated for wilderness management to other programs without House Appropriations Committee approval, even though the amounts of funds reprogrammed exceeded the limits established by the Committee.

³The procedures make exceptions for certain land purchases and construction projects.

⁴A budget activity identifies the purposes, projects, or types of activities financed.

While not a violation of Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Acts, such reprogrammings are not in concert with Committee procedures.

Of the total \$44.9 million designated for wilderness management in fiscal years 1988 through 1990, only \$28.3 million--or 63 percent--was spent on wilderness activities. Moreover, the funds spent on wilderness management actually decreased by 4 percent between fiscal years 1989 and 1990 despite a 20-percent increase in the amounts designated for wilderness management. The remaining funds were reprogrammed each year to other programs, including recreation and cultural resource management. Because these wilderness management funds were often commingled with the other recreation uses funds, the Forest Service could not identify the specific activities for which most of these reprogrammed funds were used.

Preliminary information indicates that a significant percentage of funds designated in fiscal year 1991 for wilderness management will also be reprogrammed. As of January 31, 1991, the Forest Service planned to expend only \$9.7 million of the \$22.6 million designated for wilderness management, or 43 percent.

WILDERNESS FUNDS ARE EXPENDED
FOR VARIOUS PURPOSES AT DIFFERENT
ORGANIZATIONAL LEVELS

Of the \$28.3 million spent on wilderness management in fiscal years 1988 through 1990, \$17.8 million--or 63 percent--was used by the Forest Service's district offices for such things as measuring and sometimes controlling recreational use, constructing and maintaining signs and other facilities, overseeing various types of livestock grazing, and administering commercial outfitter and guide permit programs. The remaining \$10.5 million--or 37 percent--was used for such things as headquarters oversight, regional office

planning, and supervision by forest supervisors. Although wilderness management expenditures for fiscal years 1988 through 1990 at the district office level increased somewhat each year, further analysis shows that district offices have not shared equally in the increase and that some spent substantially less for wilderness management in fiscal year 1990 than they did in fiscal year 1989.

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In summary, although the amounts designated by the Appropriations Committees for wilderness management have increased almost 80 percent from fiscal years 1988 through 1991, reprogrammings--coupled with program expenses at other organizational levels--have resulted in less than half of the total funds designated for wilderness management being used for the day-to-day management of wilderness areas.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you or members of the Subcommittee may have.