

Floor Speech: Lands Package

Senator Jon Tester

December 12, 2014

Mr/Madame President, one million people live in Montana.

We are home to farmers and ranchers. To small business owners. And to bold sportsmen and women who explore until they are too exhausted to take another step.

Our lands are famous worldwide. From Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks to wild and scenic rivers like the North Fork of the Flathead River, we attract the most daring explorers... the best hunters and anglers... and those who want to simply get away from it all...

But our outdoors aren't just for out-of-staters. Montanans deeply value our land.

Many Montanans remember their first hunting trip. Many recall where they landed their first trout. I remember riding horses with my father in the Bear Paw Mountains...

Montanans come with a lot of opinions. But one issue that unites us is taking care of our lands – and keeping our public lands in public hands.

We want to make sure that our kids and grandkids can hike in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. That they can catch their first fish in the clean waters of the Madison River. And that our outdoor traditions remain strong for generations to come.

As a Senator from Montana, it's my responsibility to make sure we preserve these treasured places. And that we responsibly use our lands to advance the interests of our state.

That's why I am proud to support the Montana lands bills being voted on today. These bills are the product of years of negotiations. Ranchers and conservationists started working on the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act before I became a Senator.

These bills are the product of compromise led by folks on the ground – the folks who live and breathe Montana's outdoors every day.

And these bills are the product of Montana's Congressional delegation working together to move our state forward.

We all know Congress fails to agree on much these days. Gridlock and roadblocks are common. Few people are willing to compromise.

But when you give a little, you get a lot. That's how these Montana lands bills became part of today's legislation.

These bills have been vetted on the ground by Montana ranchers like Dusty Crary, Karl Rappold and others. They have been approved by committees and negotiated for years. They not only deliver on our promises to Montana's ranchers, but also to our outdoorsmen and women, business owners, and Native American tribes.

They are Montana-made bills.

[BILLS]

Take the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act. This bill protects public access along the Front for hunters, anglers and outdoorsmen and women.

The Front is a special place in Montana lore. It's where the Rocky Mountains shoot straight up from the plains into the sky. It's a breathtaking and magnificent sight.

It's an ecosystem like none other in the lower 48 states...

The Heritage Act designates 208,000 Front acres as a Conservation Management Area, adds 67,000 acres to the Bob Marshall Wilderness and supports a noxious weed management plan.

At the same time, it allows for continued grazing access for Montana ranchers, follows BLM recommendations on approximately 14,000 acres of Wilderness Study Areas, and requires a new assessment of oil and gas potential in two others.

Some will question the details of this bill and others in the package. But Montanans know how to responsibly manage our lands. We know what irresponsible development looks like.

More than 100 years ago, mining corporations pillaged our lands in their search for copper, silver and other minerals. Not only did they turn our mountains inside-out and pollute our waters, they ignored workers' rights and bought influence over Montana's elected leaders.

In response, Montana passed legislation to limit corporate influence in elections back in 1912. We followed that up in the 1970s with one of the most progressive state constitutions to date, enshrining protections for a clean and healthy environment into law.

Max Baucus got his first taste of politics during that Constitutional Convention. The same Max Baucus who first worked on and introduced the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act in 2011.

Passing this bill helps fulfill Max's legacy in Montana and honors the hard work of his staff and the bill's many supporters.

Before Max introduced his bill, he received a letter from a rancher along the Front, Ben Pierce. Ben told Max that he wanted to see the Front remain a place with both well-managed, working ranches and vibrant wildlife values.

Ben supported the bill because he knew that preserving the ranching culture was critical to Montana's economy and way of life. But he also supported the bill because he knows we must preserve Montana's most special places.

That's because Montana's outdoor treasures are not only symbols of our heritage – they are also economic drivers. Montana's outdoor economy, thanks to places like Glacier and Yellowstone, creates or sustains 64,000 jobs and contributes nearly six billion dollars to the state's economy each year.

That's impressive in a state of just one million people.

From outdoor stores to park cafes, Montana's economy thrives when Montana's outdoors are preserved and accessible.

Preservation and access are also cornerstones of the *North Fork Protection Act* – another legacy of Senator Baucus. The bill permanently protects the American side of the North Fork of the Flathead River Watershed by barring future mining or drilling.

The land is adjacent to Glacier National Park. It is bounded by snow-capped mountains. Ringed by awe-inspiring valleys. And bisected by beautiful blue-green waters that are home to some of this nation's best whitewater rafting.

Its Canadian cousin across the border is already protected. And now, thanks to this bill, the American side of the watershed will be protected from oil and gas development forever.

Preserving the North Fork is not just good for wildlife or for the hiker who enjoys it. It's also good for our economy and nearby communities.

That's why this bipartisan bill is supported by the local Chamber of Commerce and the mayor of nearby Whitefish, who said the bill's passage – quote – “means permanent protection of our community's water supply.”

These two measures are not the only bills to benefit Montana in this lands package.

My *Cabin Fee Act* provides economic certainty for folks who have seen their fees skyrocket on Forest Service cabins.

Many of these cabins pass from generation to generation, and this bill makes sure that family cabins can be enjoyed by those who cherish them.

This package also does right by our Native American friends. The *Northern Cheyenne Lands Act* restores the tribe's mineral rights to 5,000 acres within its boundaries – strengthening the tribe's control over its lands, resources and trust funds.

It corrects an error by the federal government made more than 100 years ago. That, in and of itself, makes it a worthy endeavor.

But there are other areas where we can work together. Just as these bills are Montana-made solutions, we can – and I believe will – come together over Montana-made solutions to better manage our forests.

[CONCLUSION]

Mr/Madame President, for decades, folks in Montana have argued over our lands.

We've battled over access. Fought over resource development. Sued and counter-sued over logging.

But we haven't had a new wilderness designation in thirty-one years. We haven't been able to compromise.

But now we have – and it means progress for Montana.

This agreement is bipartisan. I was proud to work with Senator Walsh and Senator-elect Daines to bring it to reality.

I hope that we can find more ways to compromise over lands issues and other legislation moving forward.

Because it's the future that matters most.

Whether this body is debating immigration reform, our education system or how to rebuild our infrastructure, we are always looking to the future.

We want the best for ourselves and our communities. We want to leave this world better than how we inherited it. And we want to pass our treasured lands and outdoor traditions down to our kids and grandkids wherever they may live.

Places like the Rocky Mountain Front and the North Fork are living legacies to Montana's greatness.

There are many reasons to preserve these places, but the best I've heard comes from Gene Sentz – who hails from Choteau, Montana.

Gene wrote a book about the Rocky Mountain Front.

In it, he quoted another Montanan who said "Some places on Earth should be left alone, even if solid gold lies beneath them." I couldn't agree more.

Montana is home to sky-touching mountains and beautiful plains that roll on as far as the eye can see.

It's home to hard-working men and women and to Native Americans with deep connections to the land.

But it's The Last Best Place because we are ALL of these things and because we are willing to work together to preserve and strengthen them.

I am proud of this historic agreement, and I am particularly proud today to be a Montanan.

Mr/Madame President, I yield the floor.

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