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Do not give up your 'big backyard' to anyone

By ED PERRY

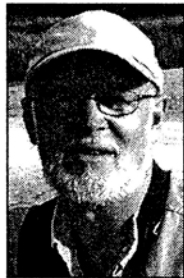
National Wildlife Federation

For the past 35 years, my wife, two sons and I have camped and fished all over the vast network of public lands out West. The experiences we've had will be with us forever, and are the subject of conversation at many of our gatherings. We are fortunate that in our country, we have millions of acres of public lands that me and other sportsmen and women can enjoy. These lands are our nation's shared wealth — the "big backyard" that affords us a place to hunt, fish and enjoy the outdoors.

Public lands for hunting and fishing are a uniquely American idea in a world where the pursuit of fish and game in the wild is often reserved for the privileged few. But America's public lands are under attack from a few in Congress who are ignoring this basic right. And as sportsmen and women, it is time for us to stand up for our public lands wealth.

Just recently, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill that would essentially hand over public lands within 100 miles of the northern and southern land borders to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, circumventing 16 conservation and environmental laws.

This means that in areas like the Bob Marshall Wil-



Ed Perry

derness in Montana, the Boundary Waters in Minnesota, as well as the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania, the

Border Patrol could ignore the Wilderness Act, the Endangered Species Act, Solid Waste Disposal Act, and National Environmental Policy Act along with many other federal laws on countless refuges, wilderness areas, and conservation areas.

The House passed this bill despite the fact that the Border Patrol and the Department of Homeland Security testified that it wasn't needed.

The border bill is the opening salvo on this Congress' effort to open up backcountry lands to oil, gas and mineral development. There is also legislation to prevent the creation of new public lands where we can hunt and fish, systematic attempts to gut conservation funding, proposals to open up 43 million acres of backcountry to development and even a bill that would sell off millions of acres of public lands.

This just isn't right. Sportsmen and women know that the better the

MY TURN

habitat, the better the sporting pursuit — and with the spread of urbanization and suburban sprawl, these public lands are often the last bastions of high quality habitat for fish and wildlife. Undermining wildlife conservation through the degradation of public lands is an attack on our outdoor traditions.

But beyond the habitat and spiritual values, Congress is turning its back on the public land resource that drives an important

part of the nation's economy. Hunting and fishing on public lands, and wildlife viewing, together pump \$122 billion into the American economy every year. Besides outdoor recreation, these public lands also support appropriate energy development, house critical water supplies, and so much more.

As a sportsman who has taken his family on many fishing and backpacking trips on public lands and can't wait to take my next trip out West, I can say that these proposals in Congress are bad for wildlife and for those of us who enjoy the

outdoors. We need to stand up for the backcountry to make sure that we don't lose our best places to hunt, fish and camp.

The vote in the House to suspend environmental protection all along our border is the first shot across the bow, and unfortunately Reps. Lou Barletta and Tom Marino didn't recognize the full implications of their vote.

But as Congress decides to move forward with other attacks on our public lands

legacy, I call on you to let them know that this has to stop, that as sportsmen and women we have just one simple request: Keep it like it is. We cannot afford to remove protections for our back-

country areas.

Keep public lands in public hands.

Ed Perry is global warming outreach coordinator for the National Wildlife Federation. He is retired from a career as a biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He lives in Boalsburg. More information: paglobalwarmingoutreach@gmail.com

Public lands set aside for hunting, fishing and exploring are a uniquely American idea and deserve vigilant protection.