Wyoming Public Lands Initiative
What is it, and what does it mean to us?

What is the Wyoming Public Lands Initiative?
The Wyoming Public Lands Initiative (WPLI), led by county commissioners in certain Wyoming counties, plans to appoint local committees that will discuss and make recommendations for public land management within each county. The process will attempt to bring together a variety of interested individuals and organizations to consider how public lands within the county might be managed differently than they are now. The primary focus of the WPLI will be on wilderness study areas in each county.

So what are wilderness study areas?
Wilderness study areas (WSAs) are areas that, about 30 years ago, were evaluated and determined to be undeveloped and have significant wilderness characteristics. Only the U.S. Congress can designate wilderness, so after these wild landscapes were identified, they were classified as WSAs, and have been managed to protect their wilderness characteristics ever since. Across Wyoming, there are 42 WSAs on BLM lands and three WSAs on Forest Service lands, totaling over 700,000 acres. The BLM and Forest Service must manage them to retain their wilderness character until Congress permanently protects them as designated wilderness or directs that they be managed in some other way. Only Congress can change the WSA designation.

Why not just leave WSAs the way they are?
That’s a great question. While WSA designation isn’t as good as permanent wilderness designation, it has worked well for 30 years to protect these wilderness quality landscapes. Many WSA areas would no longer have wilderness characteristics if they hadn’t been managed to protect those characteristics for all these years. In fact, we do not believe WSAs are a problem that needs to be fixed.

It is true that Congress could remove WSA designations. However, we are not aware of any movement to do that in Washington, D.C. at this time, so we don’t see an immediate threat there. The status quo has served us well for 30 years.

Of course, there are people and industries in Wyoming who want to see WSAs be diminished or removed altogether. On the whole, county commissioners are not supportive of wilderness or protecting lands from development. Generally speaking,
county commissions seem to be supporting and participating in the WPLI because they hope to see fewer protected landscapes in the end.

**So why would we participate in the WPLI?**

Some people want all WSAs to be released, which means they wouldn’t be managed to retain their wild character and would be available for development of various types (minerals, roads, and other development). We believe WSAs and other wilderness quality landscapes should be permanently designated wilderness. Some people think we should seek a middle ground where special management designations less than wilderness might protect some values and uses within certain landscapes in exchange for opening some WSAs for development. Some wild areas might be designated as wilderness.

We are not optimistic about this process, but we must participate so we can prevent our WSAs and wilderness quality landscapes from being thrown open to development. If anything is to be gained, the process must look beyond current WSAs, consider other wilderness quality landscapes, and explore other truly protective management options. Under the best case scenario, this process could recommend significant wilderness designations plus better management than we currently have for other special landscapes.

Bottom line: while we are skeptical of the likelihood of a successful outcome that will keep more of the landscape protected than is already protected in WSAs, we think our participation will be important to counterbalance pro-development interests.

**Could something good come from the WPLI?**

Some supporters of the WPLI hope that people with diverse interests will be able to agree on recommended legislation to permanently designate some or all WSAs as wilderness and some type of permanent protective management for other important landscapes, while also providing something of value to those who want more development (industrial or otherwise). Some believe our only hope of getting additional wilderness designations is if a recommendation comes from the local level with broad support from conservation, hunting, angling, recreation, economic, and cultural interests (and, of course, development interests), and is supported by local elected officials.

Proponents hope that county commissioners will appoint advisory committees in a fair, inclusive, and balanced manner, and that the advisory committees will work in a transparent manner that allows for public involvement. It remains to be seen how committees participants will actually be selected, and how committees will work.

**How can you help?**

You can help by getting involved in the WPLI, and applying to be on one of the local advisory committees being set up by county commissioners. If you are selected, you will be able to speak up about the value of wilderness quality lands. The quality of life we enjoy in Wyoming, as well as our outdoor recreation and tourism economy, are at stake. We need good people on these committees who will promote permanent protections for more wild public lands.
How can you be considered to serve on a local committee?

Fill out the county application and return it by email, mail, or in person by the deadline. Each county will have its own application and deadline. On the application:

- Be sure to check **every category** you can represent, including conservation, sportsman/woman, general public, non-motorized recreation, and any others that apply to you.
- In the additional comments section, be sure to suggest other categories or interests (historical, cultural, local business, tourism industry, type of recreation group, etc.) if you don’t feel the given categories fully represent your expertise, interest group, or perspective.
- On question 1, page 2, list every organization to which you belong or are affiliated.
- When asked about designations or management that you would not consider (question 7 on page 2), it would be best to say that you are willing to learn about the full range of possible designations or management and you will keep an open mind. We are concerned that if you identify specific things you would not consider, county commissioners will use that information to disqualify applicants.
- Indicate that you will be able to attend meetings.
- Some applications include questions are troubling, such as whether or not you are registered to vote, and where you used to live. If you are troubled by these questions, we suggest simply leaving them blank, and noting that you think they are irrelevant and inappropriate.

**Application information for participating counties**

**Fremont County**

Applications due Thursday, April 14, by 5:00 pm  
Submit applications by mail or email to:  
Fremont County Commissioners  
450 N. 2nd St., Rm. 205  
Lander WY 82520  
commissioners@fremontcountywy.gov

**Park County**

Applications due Friday, April 8, by 5:00 pm  
Submit by mail or email to:  
Park County Commissioners  
1002 Sheridan  
Cody WY 82414  
sromero@parkcounty.us
For more information, please contact Connie Wilbert, Director of Sierra Club Wyoming Chapter, at 307-742-0056 or connie.wilbert@sierraclub.org