To the Montana State Legislature’s Environmental Quality Council:

We would like to thank the Montana Legislature’s Environmental Quality Council (EQC) for the hard work it has undertaken in developing the report *SJ20: The Fates of Wilderness Study Areas* as directed by Senate Joint Resolution 20, passed during the 66th Montana Legislature. The council has taken care to listen to and incorporate the input of a broad range of Montanans who depend on and care about our WSAs, and the draft report reflects that effort.

The draft report recognizes the importance of collaboration, as opposed to top-down, one-size-fits-all mandates, in determining the future of WSAs. Each WSA, from the Sapphires to the Big Snowies to Ten Lakes, is unique, and the communities who know, love, and use them deserve significant input into their management through a process that is public, transparent, inclusive, and respectful of existing collaborative efforts.

Montanans have proven time and again that they are invested in such a collaborative approach to determining the management of these WSAs. Pursuing a collaborative solution will bring people together to find common ground instead of driving them apart. It will lead to durable solutions, preempt future conflict, and ensure that the views of all WSAs users are represented.

The power of a collaborative process rests in bringing Montanans with direct, deep knowledge of the places at issue together to learn about each other’s perspectives, values, and interests, acknowledging that they are all legitimate. This dialogue invariably uncovers shared values and makes it possible to identify the appropriate balance between forest management, recreation, conservation, and economic development. People become advocates for each other’s interests and leaders who can build widespread public buy-in for the solutions they’ve developed. This real, honest, and hard-won collaboration leads to durable, community-supported solutions.

We applaud the EQC’s close examination of this critical collaborative approach in the draft report.

We also respectfully request that the Council’s final report explicitly call on Montana’s congressional delegation to adopt and endorse a collaborative approach to determine the future of wilderness study areas. Moreover, the outcomes and recommendations resulting from the process should reflect that our public lands are the backbone of our outdoor heritage, a source of clean drinking water, and critical habitat for Montana’s fish and wildlife.

By explicitly calling on congress to embrace a collaborative approach, the final report can encourage our delegation to act on the hard work done by the EQC over the past year, and on wishes of the Montanans who use, love, and depend on wilderness study areas. We are on the verge of taking a major step toward a sustainable, durable, and broadly supported future for WSAs, and we must ensure that we clear this final hurdle.