

**STATEMENT
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND FORESTS
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
UNITED STATES SENATE
OCTOBER 29, 2009**

CONCERNING

S. 721, TO EXPAND THE ALPINE LAKES WILDERNESS IN THE STATE OF WASHINGTON, TO DESIGNATE THE MIDDLE FORK SNOQUALMIE RIVER AND PRATT RIVER AS WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the views of the Department of Agriculture on S. 721.

This legislation would designate approximately 22,100 acres as a component of the National Wilderness System and approximately 37 miles of river as components the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest in the State of Washington. The Department supports this legislation in concept and we would like to work with the Committee to address some technical issues as outlined below. We would also like the committee to be aware however, while we have completed suitability studies for the wild and scenic rivers, we have not completed a wilderness evaluation of the area designated under this bill. For the area that would be designated wilderness, management direction under the Land and Resource Management Plan is aligned with wilderness values with the majority of the land being managed as Late Successional Reserve under the Northwest Forest Plan. We thank the delegation for its collaborative approach and local involvement that have contributed to this bill.

Alpine Lakes Wilderness

The proposed additions to the Alpine Lakes Wilderness lie in the valleys of the Pratt River, the Middle and South Forks of the Snoqualmie River. The existing 394,000 acre Alpine Lakes Wilderness is one of the jewels of our wilderness system, encompassing rugged ice carved peaks, over 700 lakes, and tumbling rivers. The lower valleys include stands of old growth forest next to winding rivers with native fish populations. The area is located within minutes of the Seattle metro area. Trails accessing the area are among the most heavily used in the Northwest as they lead to some exceptionally accessible and beautiful destinations. The proposed additions to the Alpine Lakes Wilderness would expand this area to include the entire heavily forested Pratt River valley and trail approaches to lakes in the wilderness area in the Interstate 90 corridor.

We would like to work with the subcommittee to address some technical aspects of the bill. These include:

- The Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Trail #1003 is popular among mountain bicyclists. The Department's concern is that the trail is immediately adjacent to the proposed wilderness, not allowing sufficient room for reconstruction or relocation if needed as a result of likely future events such as flooding or landslides. We suggest a modification of the proposed wilderness boundary to allow for reconstruction or for relocation.
- The entire Pratt River Trail #1035 is included within the boundary of the proposed wilderness. The first mile of this trail currently is used by large numbers of people and groups. The trail, which would be a primary access corridor for the newly designated wilderness, is scheduled for major reconstruction work beginning this fiscal year. The Department suggests that the wilderness boundary be drawn to exclude approximately three miles of this trail to allow this continued recreation opportunity and future reconstruction if needed. This change would not alter the wilderness proposal significantly, but would allow the current recreation opportunity for high-use and large groups along this stretch of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie. This adjustment would also reduce operation and maintenance costs along this segment of the Pratt River Trail as motorized equipment could be used in its maintenance.
- The northwestern boundary of the wilderness proposal includes two segments of Washington State Department of Natural Resources lands totaling about 300 acres. We recommend that the boundary of the proposed wilderness be adjusted so that only National Forest System lands are included.

Wild and Scenic Rivers

This legislation would also designate two rivers as additions to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System: approximately 9.5 miles of the Pratt River from its headwaters to its confluence with the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River; and approximately 27.4 miles of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River from its headwaters to within ½ mile of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest boundary. Each river was studied in the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Plan and determined to be a suitable addition to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

The Pratt River has outstandingly remarkable recreation, fisheries, wildlife and ecological values. The corridor provides important hiking and fishing opportunities in an undeveloped setting. The river supports resident cutthroat trout and its corridor contains extensive deer and mountain goat winter range and excellent riparian habitat. Its corridor retains a diverse riparian forest, including remnant stands of low-elevation old-growth.

The Middle Fork Snoqualmie River also has outstandingly remarkable recreation, wildlife and fisheries values. The river is within an easy driving distance from Seattle and attracts many visitors. It provides important whitewater boating, fishing, hiking and dispersed recreation opportunities. The river corridor contains extensive deer winter range and excellent riparian

habitat for numerous wildlife species. This is the premier recreational inland-fishing location on the National Forest due to its high-quality resident cutthroat and rainbow trout populations. Adding these rivers to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System will protect their free-flowing condition, water quality and outstandingly remarkable values. Designation also promotes partnerships among landowners, river users, tribal nations and all levels of government to provide for their stewardship. We therefore support the designation of these rivers into the National Wild and Scenic River System.

The Department has one concern with the wild and scenic river designations relating to the management of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Road. We are currently in the process of improving this road and feel that this work is needed to protect the wild and scenic values associated with this river while improving visitor safety and watershed health. Approximately 20 years ago, the U.S. Forest Service submitted the Middle Fork Road to the Federal Highway Administration for reconstruction via their enhancement program. The project has been approved, design work is approximately 15% complete, and construction is planned for 2011 or 2012. The Federal Highway Administration has already expended approximately \$3 million to date on the project. We would like to work with the committee to ensure timely completion of the project.

This concludes my prepared statement and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.