

**Statement of
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Director
U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
S. 346, Southwestern Oregon Watershed and Salmon Protection Act
September 22, 2016**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S. 346, the Southwestern Oregon Watershed and Salmon Protection Act. This bill would withdraw 5,215 acres of public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and 95,806 acres of National Forest System lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service), from operation of the public land, mining, and mineral and geothermal leasing laws.

The lands to be withdrawn include the Hunter Creek and North Fork Pistol River headwaters and the Rough and Ready Creek and Baldface Creek watersheds. The lands also border or are near the Kalmiopsis Wilderness. The Department understands that the purpose of the withdrawal is to protect important habitat of threatened and endangered aquatic and botanical resources. The Department supports S. 346.

Background

In southwestern Oregon, the BLM manages approximately 1.2 million acres of public lands through the Coos Bay and Medford District Offices. The BLM works closely with the State of Oregon, tribal governments, counties and cities, as well as local communities to ensure the sustainable management of these lands and their multiple uses. The lands provide a wide variety of uses, ranging from timber production and mineral exploration to recreational opportunities and critical wildlife habitat. A high number of threatened, endangered and sensitive aquatic and botanical species are known to occur throughout the area. Mining has been identified as a primary threat to a number of these botanical species and could pose harm to the threatened salmon species within these waters.

Withdrawal Area

The lands proposed for withdrawal under S. 346 are generally known as the Klamath Mountains, and their defining characteristic is the North Fork of the Smith River, which originates in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness and drains most of the area under consideration for withdrawal. Once it crosses the Oregon-California state line, the Smith River is the largest free-flowing river system in California. Creeks that feed into the North Fork and other rivers that flow to the Oregon Coast offer unique ecological features stemming from the confluence of the Coast Range, Cascades, and Siskiyou Mountains. A high concentration of rare plants, forested trails, and scenic views are all emblematic of these drainages. Rough and Ready Creek and Baldface Creek are listed as eligible for National Wild and Scenic River designation by the U.S. Forest Service.

Administrative Segregation

On June 29, 2015, the Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Land and Minerals Management published in the Federal Register a Notice of Proposed Withdrawal and Notification of Public Meetings (Notice) for the lands identified in S. 346. This Notice temporarily segregated the lands for two years from operation of the public land, mining, and mineral and geothermal leasing laws. The segregation is in effect until June 29, 2017. The segregation is intended to maintain current conditions while Congress considers the legislation for a permanent withdrawal.

The current segregation protects all valid existing rights, including those under the mining and mineral leasing laws. Existing mining claims may be developed if a minerals validity examination shows that a discovery of a valuable mineral deposit existed at the time of the segregation. Currently, there are 279 existing claims in the withdrawal areas, of which 234 are lode claims and 45 are placer claims. To date, no existing claims have been proven valid under the validity examination process.

S. 346

S. 346 would permanently withdraw 5,215 acres of BLM-managed public lands in the Coos Bay and Medford Districts and 95,806 acres of Forest Service lands in the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest from operation of the public land, mining, and mineral and geothermal leasing laws. The proposed withdrawal encompasses two areas near or bordering the Kalmiopsis Wilderness. These include the Hunter Creek and North Fork Pistol River headwaters and the Rough and Ready Creek and Baldface Creek watersheds.

The Department supports S. 346, which will ensure the protection of both the lands and resources it covers. The necessity of this protection is exemplified by the fact that within the lands proposed for withdrawal by S. 346, the BLM's 2016 Northwestern and Coastal Resource Management Plan and Southwestern Oregon Resource Management Plan identified five Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) – Hunter Creek Bog, North Fork Hunter Creek, West Fork Illinois River, Rough and Ready, and Woodcock Bog. The two Resource Management Plans also recommended the withdrawal of these five ACECs.

Additionally, included within the boundary of the withdrawal are approximately 1,680 acres of non-Federal land that are not currently affected by segregation or withdrawal. If these non-Federal acres enter into Federal ownership in the future, they would become subject to the terms and conditions of the withdrawal.

Finally, like the current temporary segregation the permanent withdrawal proposed under S. 346 would not prohibit mining operations under existing notices or plans. Any preexisting exploration or mining operations would continue, but new mining claims would be prohibited. S. 346 also would not restrict existing recreational uses or forest management activities.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of S. 346, which would serve to protect pristine and unique natural areas in southwest Oregon. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.