

**STATEMENT OF CHRIS FRENCH  
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Before the  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS, FORESTS, AND MINING  
Regarding  
S. 3670 – M.H. DUTCH SALMON GREATER GILA WILD AND SCENIC RIVER ACT  
September 16, 2020**

Chairman Lee, Ranking Member Wyden and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regarding S. 3670, the “M.H. Dutch Salmon Greater Gila Wild and Scenic River Act.”

This bill designates approximately 450 miles of the Gila River system in New Mexico as components of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System and transfers 440 acres of land from the Gila National Forest to the Gila Cliff Dwellings Monument.

Designating rivers as components of the Wild and Scenic Rivers has numerous effects on use and accessibility. USDA supports designation of wild and scenic rivers if they have been analyzed and designated as suitable through the land management planning process, which includes local engagement and public input. None of the streams or rivers on the Gila National Forest are currently Congressionally designated as Wild and Scenic Rivers. As part of the current Gila National Forest Plan Revision process, a new Wild and Scenic Rivers eligibility study was conducted for the Gila National Forest. An Interdisciplinary Team carried out a transparent eligibility study informed by stakeholder and public input. A previous eligibility study was completed by the Gila National Forest in 2002, and based on this information the extent of the current study was limited to the 158 river segments that were not previously evaluated and to any of the previously studied rivers that had experienced changed circumstances that warranted a new evaluation. Currently, Gila National Forest staff are evaluating the over 27,000 comments received through the plan revision process.

The approximately 450 miles identified for designation in the legislation were not informed by the ongoing Gila National Forest plan revision process. Because the plan revision process has not been completed, it would be premature for the Administration to take a position on designations in the bill.

We want to ensure that any new designations are properly integrated into the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System with reasonable time to develop comprehensive river management plans and to establish detailed boundaries in cooperation with interested public. The short timeframe for completion of a plan in Section 3(d) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is challenging to

meet. We suggest an exemption from this requirement is warranted to ensure the river management plans for any new designations align with future scheduled revisions of land and resource management plans of the applicable national forests.

Additionally, this bill proposes to transfer 440 acres of land from the Gila National Forest to the Gila Cliff Dwellings Monument. This transfer could alleviate maintenance concerns for facilities. The agency looks forward to working with the Committee to ensure multiple uses would not be affected by the proposed land transfer.

The Forest Service is committed to collaborating with Congress, Tribes and all members of the interested public during our land management planning process to identify and propose appropriate parcels of land or river segments within the National Forest System in New Mexico for potential designation as wild and scenic and to manage those parcels responsibly when designated. We look forward to working with the sponsors of this bill to address the concerns outlined above and to provide appropriate clarifications that may be useful.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this bill, and I welcome any questions.