

Testimony of Jennifer Hunter, York River Wild and Scenic Study Coordinator
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks
Hearing on S. 491 – June 23, 2021

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you. I am Jennifer Hunter, from York, Maine. For the last 5.5 years, I have been coordinator of the York River Wild and Scenic Study. York River is a coastal river in southern Maine, with watershed lands in Eliot, Kittery, South Berwick, and York. I am speaking on behalf of the York River Wild and Scenic Study Committee in support of Senate Bill 491 which aims to designate 30.8 miles of York River and its major tributaries into the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Our local Wild and Scenic River study was authorized by Congress in December 2014 and conducted from late 2015 through 2018. With expert input and community engagement throughout the process, our study committee evaluated York River's eligibility and suitability for a Wild and Scenic River designation, using the "partnership" model typical for rivers that flow through non-federal lands. Of the 226 rivers in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, 16 are Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers.

Our study confirmed that York River is an excellent candidate for designation. The river miles proposed for designation are free flowing with good water quality. There is no shortage of river-related "outstandingly remarkable values" that serve as the basis for designation. Our relatively small coastal watershed has over 100 documented archaeological sites – including Native American sites dating back thousands of years and early colonial sites, such as the first tidal mill dam in the English colonies built in 1634. The 1,700-acre area surrounding York Harbor and the lower York River is a National Register Historic District. There are eight individual sites listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Sewall's Bridge, which was America's first wooden pile draw bridge and is now a National Engineering Landmark, spans the river. There is an active working waterfront that is important to our economy and community's character. The watershed supplies clean drinking water to community residents and to the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. State and regional assessments characterize the York River system as exemplary for its ecological significance, watershed resilience, and healthy salt marsh habitats. It is one of the most biodiverse areas in Maine and is home to more endangered and threatened species than any other area in the state.

Clearly, we have a special river ecosystem. However, there are threats. The York River watershed is a fast-growing area, with concerns of overuse and development impacts potentially affecting water quality and natural habitats. As a coastal watershed, it is subject to rising seas, warmer water and air temperatures, and more intense storms. Proactive stewardship is needed now more than ever to preserve the river for current and future generations. A culminating product of our study was development of the York River Watershed Stewardship Plan that can help guide long-term river resource preservation.

For our study, we also made sure that designation and inclusion in the national program is a good fit for the river and our communities. We concluded it is. Designation will provide technical assistance, financial support, and a four-community coalition to discuss river stewardship issues and take

action based on local priorities and needs. The Partnership model for designation maintains local control of land use and river management. A Partnership Wild and Scenic River designation will bolster community-led river stewardship efforts and enable sustained actions to preserve York River.

There is widespread local support for Partnership Wild and Scenic River designation. In late 2018, voters in Eliot and York and town councils in Kittery and South Berwick overwhelmingly approved warrant articles and resolutions to designate York River and approve the York River Watershed Stewardship Plan. Over two dozen community groups wrote letters endorsing river designation.

Our Wild and Scenic River study process, which began 12 years ago, demonstrated a commitment to river stewardship among our four towns, conservation organizations, civic groups, landowners, river users, local and state agencies, and the National Park Service. We look forward to York River becoming a Partnership River in our National Wild and Scenic Rivers System so that we can continue our cooperative efforts. I thank you for your interest and support.