

Statement of
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Land and Minerals Management

House Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Hearing on H.R. 233, Northern California Coastal Wild Heritage Act
July 14, 2005

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 233, the Northern California Coastal Wild Heritage Wilderness Act. I will confine my remarks to those provisions of the bill that relate to lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and will defer to the Department of Agriculture on provisions regarding lands managed by the Forest Service.

When the Department of the Interior testified before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee in July of 2004 on companion legislation to H.R. 233, we testified that we would support the legislation as it relates to BLM-managed lands if a number of proposed amendments were made. Those issues have largely been addressed in H.R. 233, except our recommended language on water rights.

This Administration strongly supports the efforts of Members of Congress to work together with their local constituents to find solutions to the lingering Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs). Only Congress can determine the final status of WSAs—whether to designate as wilderness or release lands from WSA status. The WSA issue is one that should be resolved and we always stand ready to work with Members of Congress toward solutions.

H.R. 233 proposes to designate as wilderness nearly 120,000 acres of BLM-managed lands in California's 1st Congressional District, and to expand the existing King Range National Conservation Area (NCA) by approximately 3,326 acres of BLM-managed public lands. The areas proposed for designation include stunning landscapes, dramatic coastlines, and unique habitats. Taken together, these proposed wilderness areas include pristine Pacific Coast, steep inland canyons, rushing whitewater and mountainous terrain. The array of wildlife is incredibly diverse. Large mammals such as elk, sea lions, and black bear populate these areas. Various raptors including the endangered northern spotted owl, peregrine falcons and eagles nest there. Additionally, the areas provide significant habitat for steelhead, coho, and Chinook salmon, all listed endangered species. Recreational use is varied and scattered throughout the area, including rafting, fishing, hiking, camping, and hunting, all of which will continue after designation.

A brief description of each proposed wilderness designation is in order:

- King Range Wilderness—42,585 acres encompassing both the Chemise Mountain WSA and the King Range WSA would be designated wilderness. This area truly would be a crown jewel of the wilderness system. Its 26 miles of pristine and undeveloped coastline is the longest in the continental United States. Referred to as California's "Lost Coast," this dramatic wilderness area is within the King Range National Conservation Area (NCA) established by Congress in 1970. Included in the proposed King Range Wilderness would be the Federally-owned rocks, islets and islands located off the coast of the King Range NCA—an estimated 200 rocks and islands totaling approximately 5 acres.
- Yuki Wilderness--54,087 acres are proposed for wilderness designation, including approximately 17,700 acres of BLM-managed lands which include a steep, rugged river corridor. The larger acreage, approximately 35,000 acres, is managed by the Forest Service. We support the designation of the BLM acres (which encompass most of the Thatcher Ridge WSA) as a portion of the overall Yuki Wilderness.
- Yolla Bolly-Middle Eel Wilderness additions—expands the existing 153,000-acre Yolla Bolly-Middle Eel Wilderness Area by approximately 25,806 acres (the existing area includes over 7,000 acres of BLM-managed lands). However, only 734 acres of the wilderness addition is BLM-managed land. We support the designation of these 734 acres as a part of the much larger Forest Service addition.
- Cache Creek Wilderness—30,870 acres are designated as wilderness within Cache Creek. Recent BLM acquisitions of private inholdings within the external boundary of the proposed wilderness would add an additional 155 acres to the total lands designated for wilderness. Waters rushing through this area's steep canyons provide popular whitewater rafting venues while the surrounding oak woodlands are home to several herds of tule elk. We support this designation that falls within the Congressional District.
- Cedar Roughs Wilderness—6,350 acres of BLM WSA is designated as wilderness. We support this designation. The BLM has administratively designated this land as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) in recognition of its significant Sargent cypress stand and important black bear population.
- South Fork Eel Wilderness—12,915 acres to be designated encompassing the Red Mountain WSA. The area is home to a number of endangered species, including the northern spotted owl and several salmon species as well as some unique and rare geological features. The designation is supported by the BLM.
- Elkhorn Ridge Potential Wilderness Area—9,655 acres of BLM-managed lands are proposed for a "potential wilderness area."

Under the terms of the legislation, the area would become wilderness within 5 years, or earlier, if determined by the Secretary of the Interior that appropriate ecological restoration had taken place. This area contains a portion of the Eel River headwaters and provides significant endangered species habitat. The BLM has recently acquired 1,416 acres within the Elkhorn Ridge area. Given these acquisitions and the restoration that has taken place on the land, we recommend the Committee consider whether a wilderness designation, rather than this interim step, would be more appropriate.

For those areas in the bill not identified as WSAs, and for the areas in the bill that were determined by the BLM to be non-suitable for wilderness, we note that Congress has plenary authority over the disposition of public lands. Except as otherwise specified, if Congress ultimately approves the bill, we do not see any additional management impediments to their inclusion.

We would like the opportunity to work with the sponsors and the Committee to perfect the maps in a few cases. In both Cache Creek and Elkhorn Ridge, recent BLM land acquisitions should be shown to ensure the maps are accurate.

The Department strongly recommends the legislation be amended to clarify that the wilderness designation not constitute or be construed to constitute either an express or implied Federal reservation of any water right. If a reserved water right is deemed necessary in the future, it would be obtained in accordance with applicable state law.

A new provision of the legislation, which was included in last year's Senate-passed bill, would expand the King Range NCA by approximately 3,326 acres. The additions, along Mill Creek, Squaw Creek and Indian Creek were the result of cooperative efforts with local citizens, government agencies and conservation groups. There is strong local support for the protection of these areas and their inclusion within the King Range NCA. These additions will enhance recreational opportunities in the King Range.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the sections of H.R. 233 which apply to BLM-managed lands. The resolution of these longstanding WSA questions is a priority for the Department and we welcome the opportunity to move this debate forward.

I would be happy to answer any questions.