

Written testimony of Congressman Howard P. "Buck" McKeon
On H.R. 5149, the Eastern Sierra Rural Heritage and Economic Enhancement Act of 2006

Before the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

July 27, 2006

Mr. Chairman, today I am grateful for the opportunity to bring before you H.R. 5149, The Eastern Sierra Rural Heritage and Economic Enhancement Act. This legislation is twenty-two years in the making, and enjoys a level of community input and cooperation unique for a bill of this type. (MAP OF CA25) The legislation is two-fold, adding nearly 40,000 acres of land to the Hoover and Emigrant Wildernesses in Mono County, as well as adding 26 miles of the Amargosa River in Inyo County to the National Wild and Scenic River Registry.

The origins of the Hoover Wilderness Addition go back to 1984, when the United States Forest Service began a survey of forest lands in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California to determine which areas should be recommended for wilderness designation. (MAP) Consequently, two years later, the Forest Service recommended that approximately 47,000 acres of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, lying west of the established Hoover Wilderness, east of the Emigrant Wilderness, and north of Yosemite National Park, should be wilderness designation. Since 1986, the land has been managed by the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest as an agency-recommended wilderness area.

However, the original Forest Service recommendation presented a problem. It proposed a wilderness area that also included land with a tremendous potential for winter recreation. Snowmobilers enjoy traveling to this region for its steep slopes, chutes, and breathtaking scenery. This is particularly true of the area surrounding Leavitt Lake which is known as the Leavitt Bowl. Consequently, these recreationists wanted the recommendation to be decreased to allow for motorized winter recreation in the region.

By contrast, some environmentalists wanted the original recommended wilderness to be designated in its entirety, as proposed by the Forest Service, thus eliminating entirely the possibility of snowmobile use. Recreationalists wanted the recommendation to be decreased to allow for motorized winter recreation in the region.

A solution to this problem seemed out of reach until a few years ago, when redistricting brought a major portion of California's Eastern Sierra Mountains into my district. The issue was brought to my attention by residents and officials within Mono County. My promise to them was straight-forward: if the community could come together and find a compromise that suited key parties, I would present that compromise to Congress as legislation.

I invited participants to the negotiating table who were genuinely committed to their positions, yet would be open to compromise. Mono County Supervisor Hap Hazard moderated the private negotiations process as well as the public hearings which were held to allow residents and outside parties to participate and share their concerns.

The final product was agreed to by the participants, and was passed by unanimous consent by the Mono County Board of Supervisors. The people of Mono County have worked diligently to keep their end of the bargain, and I am pleased to present mine to you today.

It is clear to see why the Forest Service recommended this area for wilderness designation. (PHOTOGRAPHS) This small area of forest is home to wildlife such as black bear, mountain lion, mule deer, waterfowl, and a wintering population of bald eagles. The rivers and lakes within this wilderness attract fishermen, campers, hikers, photographers, and vacationing families to the region every year. As you can see from the photographs, this land truly captures the magnificence of the Eastern Sierras.

(MAP) In the agreement, 39,680 acres of the original wilderness recommendation remain as the Hoover Wilderness Addition. 640 acres of the original wilderness recommendation also remain as the Emigrant Wilderness Addition. This small piece is contiguous with the existing Emigrant Wilderness and contains approximately two miles of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail, a spectacular national resource. The area north of the Hoover and Emigrant Wilderness Additions, including the Leavitt Bowl, has been left out of the wilderness addition to accommodate winter recreation and snowmobiling. An additional 3,200 acres of land in the northeast corner of the original Forest Service recommendation has also been removed from the wilderness proposal to accommodate snowmobile use, totaling approximately 11,000 acres for motorized winter recreation.

As with any compromise, there are groups from both sides who are not pleased with the final product. Unfortunately

one gentleman from the snowmobilers' side left the negotiating table toward the end of the discussion. His absence nearly torpedoed the entire process, but after a public hearing regarding his departure, the panel decided to proceed. I trust the leadership of the Mono County Board of Supervisors and the men and women of the negotiating panel. The agreement they came to required extensive deliberations resulting in sacrifices by all parties, and I support their decisions.

(PHOTOGRAPHS) In addition to wilderness designation in Mono County, this legislation designates 24 miles of the Amargosa River as part of the National Wild and Scenic River System. The Amargosa River is the only river flowing into Death Valley and supports a great variety of wildlife including more than 260 different types of birds. The Amargosa has a rich history, which can be seen by simply walking along its banks. The canyon which houses the river has been inhabited for over 10,000 years, and visitors often find ancient relics and petroglyphs. Fossils of mastadons, camels, ancient horses and elephants have also been uncovered by locals and visitors.

(MAP) H.R. 5149 divides the Amargosa River segment into three parts: 8 miles of wild river, 11 miles of scenic river, and 5 miles of recreational river. The separation of the three segments ensures that visitors will find the individual experiences they seek by coming to the Amargosa River while maintaining the delicate ecology of the river.

Mr. Chariman, the wilderness and river additions in this legislation were selected for their historical importance, their natural beauty, and to meet the needs of the communities whose heritage is so much a part of the Eastern Sierras. These communities will benefit not only from the preservation of the lands designated in my bill, but from the increase in travel and investment in these areas. The livelihood of many local businesses, including supply stores, lodging establishments, restaurants, fishing and camping outfitters, and Mammoth Mountain Ski Area, one of the largest employers in Mono County, comes from tourism to the area in both the summer and winter months. Expanding snowmobiling opportunities will only spur the growth of the local economy.

H.R. 5149 has received bipartisan support from local residents, businesses, and government officials. Mr. Chairman, along with a list of nearly 300 businesses who support the bill, I am submitting into the record letters of support from Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, who have introduced the Senate companion bill to this legislation, and the Mono County Republican Central Committee. I am also submitting the resolutions agreed to by the Inyo County Board of Supervisors and the Mono County Board of Supervisors. Lastly, while they could not be here today, I am submitting the written testimony of Supervisor Hap Hazard of the Mono County Board of Supervisors, and the written testimony of Mr. Brian Brown. Mr. Brown is a resident of Inyo County and owner of China Ranch in Topeca, and has been a leading figure in the effort to designate the Amargosa River segment.

Mr. Chairman, I am deeply grateful to the residents of Mono and Inyo counties for the dedication they have shown to each of the projects outlined in this legislation, and I am pleased to offer the Eastern Sierra Rural Heritage and Economic Enhancement Act for your consideration.