

Statement of Jim Wattenburger
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On H.R. 233, the Northern California Wild Heritage Wilderness Act
Before the United States House of Representatives
Resources Committee, Subcommittee on Forests
July 14, 2005

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Jim Wattenburger and I serve as the Supervisor for Mendocino County's Second District. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the Northern California Coastal Wild Heritage Wilderness Act.

First, I would like to recognize some other visitors here today from California's First Congressional District. Lake County Supervisor Ed Robey; Humboldt County Supervisor John Wooley; Napa County Supervisor Diane Dillon; and Mayor of Willits Tami Jorgensen.

We all believe that this bill will be of great benefit to our counties. It will preserve our spectacular scenery and unmatched opportunities for outdoor recreation. It will keep our air and water clean and allow us to pass our natural heritage on to future generations. It will safeguard over 300 miles of important salmon and steelhead fisheries, thereby protecting commercial and recreational fishing on the north coast. And it will help the economy of the region by attracting tourists and new residents drawn by the North Coast's unmatched quality of life.

Over the past four years, Representative Thompson and Senators Boxer and Feinstein sought out and received input from a wide range of local stakeholders in crafting their legislation. They consulted with local businesses, landowners, elected officials, fire managers and equestrians, Native Americans, mining interests, timber companies, anglers, hunters, ranchers, and local mountain bikers throughout the First Congressional District. There have been 33 public hearings and forums and over 40 significant modifications have been made to the proposal to address local concerns. These include adding clarifying language regarding fire management and access to private property as well as boundary adjustments of more than 27,000 acres. As a result, the bill is now a mosaic of fine-tuned adjustments designed to address local interests.

For example, the proposal does not close any legal roads or authorized off road vehicle routes. The sponsors also went to great lengths to ensure that existing access to private property would be protected, with Senator Feinstein even adding clarifying language preserving current access for in-holders in the King Range. Existing grazing rights will be unaffected and the sponsors employed thorough due diligence in their modifications for fire and fire management concerns.

And let me just say that as a former Battalion Chief for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, I clearly understand the need to protect people and property from catastrophic wildland fires and am confident that this bill will do just that.

Representative Thompson, and Senators Feinstein and Boxer consulted with local land managers, community leaders and private landowners over fire issues and made 17 modifications to an earlier version of the bill for the purposes of fire management alone. These changes included adjusting boundaries to remove over 15,000 acres from the proposal and adding additional clarifying management language, such as allowing the BLM to keep a fire truck inside the Wilderness boundary in the King Range. They adjusted boundaries and removed areas in response to local resident or agency recommendations to pursue aggressive fuel load reduction in places where such actions were deemed necessary.

Most importantly, consistent with the Wilderness Act and with the California Wilderness Act of 1984, this bill is written to allow land managers to use any means necessary to fight fires and any means necessary to conduct fire pre-suppression activities in wilderness areas in order to protect communities, private property, and the health of the land. As a former fire fighter, I know that you want to go in to a fire knowing that you will have all options available at your disposal. In case there is any doubt about what you can or can't do to fight fire in a Wilderness area, let me just say for the record that this bill, like the Wilderness Act, affords federal agencies the ability to use mechanized equipment to fight fire in wilderness areas. California has had at least five fires in Wilderness areas in the last seven years where bulldozers, chainsaws and / or helicopters have been used to fight fires. For example, I commanded the air operations for a fire in the Snow Mountain Wilderness during August and September of 2001 where I directed helicopters and tankers to drop short term retardant. Fire crews also used chainsaws within the designated wilderness to widen firebreaks along existing trails, take down dangerous dead trees, and clear helicopter landing areas. I am confident that this bill reflects thoughtful, thorough and more than sufficient accommodations to mitigate fire risk and fire management concerns for the land affected.

As a pro-business Republican and member of the Ukiah Chamber of Commerce, I want to also say that the economic benefits

of this proposal are also clear to me. Tourism is an important part of our economy along with timber, fishing, agriculture and retail. The areas proposed for protection are considered poor candidates for logging but are well suited to attract visitors who want to hike, boat, hunt and fish.

These visitors will eat at our restaurants, stay at our hotels and shop in our stores. By creating new destinations on the map, this bill will draw new people to the region and certainly help bolster these segments of the north coast's economy.

With the clear benefits of wilderness designation and the vast array of accommodations made to address local concerns, this bill has earned the support of a broad and diverse set of local interests. In Mendocino County, Harwood Products, a local lumber mill, has thrown their support behind the bill, as has the Twin Rocks Inholders Association, a group of private land owners who live adjacent to the proposed Yolla Bolly additions. The Tri-County Independent Living Association, an advocacy group for the disabled, has also endorsed the legislation.

In total, I will submit as part of my written testimony a list of over 200 local interests supporting the bill, including over 40 county and municipal elected officials, tribes, religious groups, inholders, citizen organizations, and small businesses including ranches and mills. These letters represent the support of many thousands of first district residents.

I hope you will join with Representative Thompson in supporting the Northern California Coastal Wild Heritage Wilderness Act, and pass it out of your committee. Thank you for this opportunity to speak here today.