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Testimony Before the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

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Chairman Walden, Congressman Inslee, and other Members of the Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify today on behalf of H.R. 822 the Wild Sky Wilderness Act. I'd also like to thank Senator Murray, and Congressman Larsen for sponsoring this important legislation and working diligently over the past three years to develop and promote the Wild Sky Wilderness proposal and House Members Jennifer Dunn, Jay Inslee, Norm Dicks, Brian Baird, Adam Smith and Jim McDermott for co-sponsoring this important legislation. I would like to further thank Congressman Nethercutt for his willingness to collaborate with staff from Senator Murray and Congressman Larsen's offices to work out differences in the boundaries.

My name is Mike Town and I am testifying today on behalf of the Friends of the Wild Sky, an association of local residents and concerned citizens who support permanent protection for the Wild Skykomish Country. My background includes an undergraduate degree in Terrestrial Ecosystems Analysis and work experience in silviculture with the USDA Forest Service. Currently I am a high school science teacher. My wife, who is also a science teacher, and I first moved into the beautiful Skykomish valley in 1988, and we continue to live in the shadows of the Wild Sky country.

I am also testifying today based on my extensive personal experience and knowledge of the Wild Skykomish Country. As an avid outdoorsman I have spent the last 15 years exploring the beautiful Skykomish area. Each year I hike, ski, and snowshoe more than 200 miles to the forests, high country meadows, secluded lakes and numerous mountain streams in the proposed Wild Sky Wilderness. My wife and I have written a newspaper column on the wonders of the Wild Sky region for our local newspaper the Monroe Monitor. Each summer I teach college courses on mining, ecology, and history within the boundaries of this wilderness proposal.

I would like to take the entire Committee to see this special place, but the best I can do today is to try to describe in words why the Wild Skykomish Country is a perfect candidate for designation to our National Wilderness Preservation System.

Within the boundaries of the proposed Wild Sky Wilderness are lush old growth forests, high peaks over 6000 feet tall, breathtaking waterfalls, 1000-foot cliffs, pristine rivers and secluded alpine lakes. The proposal protects over 25 miles of the Skykomish River, which provides habitat for endangered species, world-class white water and renowned fishing. Other watersheds in the proposal contribute to clean and safe drinking water for the City of Everett and the forested slopes reduce the potential for downstream flooding. Recreation abounds in the Wild Sky as backcountry skiers; anglers, hunters, hikers, horseback riders and campers flock to this spectacular area. This steady flow of visitors is increasingly important to the economic stability of small towns in the Skykomish valley.

Since the Members of the Committee can't go there, I'd like to describe this special place – moving west to east:

Ragged Ridge

The wild country directly north of Gold Bar and Index is an area of high lakes and ridges. From Arsenic Meadows to Northstar Mountain, one can wander through some of the loneliest terrain in the Cascades. Extensive middle elevation forests, mostly western hemlock and silver fir, cover the hillsides, with scenic

parklands of mountain hemlock above. This is an area without established trails - this is wilderness in the truest sense, a great big blank spot on the map. It's a place where just about nobody ever goes, or, in more scientific terms, "core security habitat," for many kinds of wildlife. This area also includes many streams, which form the headwaters of the Sultan River, which provide clean drinking and irrigation water to the City of Everett, and many residents in southern Snohomish County.

Lower North Fork Skykomish Valley

The lower fifteen or so miles of the North Fork valley contain beautiful ancient forests with several trees over 8 feet in diameter. Some of this area was railroad logged in the 1920's and '30's. During this time only the highest value trees were taken and much of the biological legacy survived. Most importantly, these areas were never replanted, and a diverse, naturally regenerated forest has grown back. There are many miles of these forests along the North Fork road, and from high vantage points in the Wild Sky they form a continuous green blanket over the entire lower valley. Many areas within this area include low elevation forest, which lie close to the river and are important for water quality and fish health.

Eagle Rock Roadless Area

This country inside the Jack's Pass road loop is east and south of the lower North Fork, west of the Beckler River valley and north of Highway 2. The Eagle Rock area contains some of the most rugged mountain terrain in the Skykomish area, with sharp, jagged Gunn, Merchant and Baring peaks prominently visible from highway 2. Only one formal trail enters the area, to scenic and popular Eagle Lake at the end of Paradise Meadow.

This is a place of many diverse attractions. On its southern edge, some of the most impressive old growth forests in the Cascades grows on low, south facing slopes just north of the village of Grotto. A large area of Alaska cedar forest is found near Eagle Lake, and further north, the valleys of upper Trout and Howard creeks support extensive virgin forest. Seldom visited lakes like Sunset and Boulder lay at the heads of valleys, offering outstanding fishing. Botanically significant areas like Paradise Meadow display rare orchids, and carnivorous sundews as well as a bouquet of flowers in the early summer. The central and northern reaches of the Eagle Rock area are little visited, and mysterious. Summits such as Conglomerate Point and Spire Mountain see only a few visitors in any year while other places like Bear Mountain and upper Bear Creek valley may go a decade or more without seeing any humans.

West Cady Ridge

As one move further up the North Fork Skykomish, the land begins to change. Rather than the sharp peaks, and fearsome brush and cliffs of Eagle Rock, the terrain opens up and the mountains grow gentler. Long ridges topped by extensive flower meadows provide extensive bear habitat and important wildlife corridors to other areas in the Cascades. This is a friendly, inviting country, slightly drier than areas further west. There are a number of popular trails, such as West Cady ridge and Scorpion Mountain. Certain other areas lend themselves well to off-trail wandering through open forests and meadows.

As you can see the Wild Sky country is a land of contradictions. It is rimmed by powerful mountains, cut by turbulent streams, punctuated with biologically diverse forests and meadows and filled with habitats for a wide range of common and rare species. Its pure waters provide adventure for white water rafters, habitat for fish, drinking water for Snohomish County, and flood control for downstream residents. Its recreational benefits are endless and its ecological significance so valuable that this area demands permanent protection.

Unfortunately, the Wild Sky area was excluded from consideration in the 1984 Washington Wilderness legislation and left hanging at the end of the 107th Congress. However, 20 years after the creation of the last wilderness in Washington State, Congress can revisit the Wild Sky and grant the protection this unique and beautiful area deserves.

Some have tried to portray the Wild Sky Wilderness area is not worthy of protection. I have had a chance to review their testimony submitted last year to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources subcommittee on Public Lands and Forest. For the past 6 months, I investigated on the ground the issues raised. Here's what I've seen:

It was pointed out that a small portion of the Wild Sky area had been previously logged. However, almost all

of these areas are mostly at lower elevations, and most are already recovering naturally from the railroad logging that occurred during the 1920's and 30's.

For example, along the North Fork of the Skykomish there are forest stands that were logged about 80 years ago. These stands, left to grow back on their own rather than being reforested with a monoculture of Douglas fir, have almost returned to their former glory. Now they feature species diversity, multi-layer canopies and an abundance of ecologically important reproductive niches. These forests are in direct contrast to the second growth forest started from reforested trees, which are so abundant throughout the portions of the Cascades, which have been previously logged. Other than the occasional stump, these forests appear quite natural to almost all visitors as they assume the full characteristics of ancient forests.

Another example of past logging is seen in the area of lower West Cady Creek, a tributary stream of the North Fork Skykomish River. This valley was partially logged, but extensive areas of old growth forest remain. Ten years ago the most significant logging road in this valley was decommissioned and the logged areas have now stabilized soils and begun to contribute significant ecological values. This vibrant lowland valley must be included in the Wild Sky Wilderness to protect the integrity of the remaining old growth and mature second-growth forests, water quality, and important wildlife corridors. It also provides a logical and manageable Wilderness boundary by excluding a non-Wilderness finger intruding deeply into the proposed Wilderness.

It is important to include these previously impacted areas in the Wilderness in order to protect stream habitat to help ensure the survival of salmon, steelhead and bull trout. It is also important for these low elevation forests to be better represented in Washington's Wilderness Areas, to fully reflect this especially important type of ecosystem and wild landscape, which promotes biodiversity and is absent in so many other wilderness areas in the state.

It was claimed that the area includes approximately 27 miles of existing roads, some of which are all weather, drivable and graveled. Actually, the Wild Sky Wilderness would impact only about 2 miles of roads that are currently passable by passenger vehicles. The objections overstate the effect of the proposed Wilderness by not taking into account roads that have already been decommissioned – i.e., non-drivable and permanently closed by the Forest Service – and other roads that are currently gated or otherwise closed by the agency to prevent access. Landslides, washouts, and vegetation close a number of other road segments, or other random acts of nature.

It was also suggested that the Rapid River road receives high levels of visitor use for recreation purposes, and should be excluded. It's important to clarify that the Wild Sky Wilderness proposal would only impact approximately 1 mile of the upper section of this road. The lower 5 miles of this road would remain open.

The last mile of the Rapid River Road, which passes through towering stands of ancient forest, actually gets very limited visitation because it is rough and accesses only one dispersed recreation site. Many drivers stop at the Meadow Creek trailhead that is located outside of the wilderness boundary. In fact, last year I spent 4 hours along this section on Saturday of Memorial Day weekend – a beautiful sunny day, and did not see a single vehicle on the upper section of this road. In any case, it is important to close the upper portion of Rapid River Road for a number of reasons: the closed road could be converted into a barrier-free trail that is wheel-chair accessible; closure will protect significant ancient forest and important riparian areas; and it will leave this low elevation area, which is open almost all year, accessible by a short hike. Indeed, leaving the last mile of this road in the Wild Sky provides a great opportunity for a family wilderness experience.

Past mining activity was raised as an issue but it is not as significant as is contended. While large areas of the Cascades have experienced the region's mining history, no major mine site ever existed in the Wild Sky proposal. Mining in this area was mostly limited to small claims that were worked sporadically for short periods up until the 1950's. Today the visible evidence of mining activity is limited to an occasional mine portal, some old road disturbances and rare dilapidated miner's shacks, and most of these are actually on private lands which are surrounded by National Forest land.

What the critics of the Wild Sky choose not to discuss is the strong local support for the Wild Sky in the valley and its endorsement by many local officials, businesses and over 1000 valley residents who signed a petition asking for the creation of the Wild Sky Wilderness. The Monroe City Council unanimously passed a resolution in support of Wild Sky and the Mayor of Index, the closest town to the proposal, testified before the Senate committee in 2002 in support of wilderness designation.

Clearly, people in Snohomish County and eastern King County care about the quality of life they get from the Wild Sky country whether it be in the form of accessible wilderness oriented recreation, pure drinking water or the knowledge that the ancient forest and salmon will continue to provide solitude, serenity and enjoyment which is guaranteed with Federal Wilderness protection.

The critics also ignore the open process Congressman Larsen and Senator Murray pursued in drafting the Wild Sky legislation. I attended the public meeting at Monroe where about a hundred interested people asked questions and gave input on the proposal. From my observations, most of the questions and observations were typical for a proposed Wilderness Area. I believe all the concerns have been addressed through the process. One example was the inclusion of a beautiful and ecologically significant grove of ancient cedars, which was added from a request from a local, Index resident. Another example was the deletion of many acres on Johnson and Windy Ridges brought about through meetings conducted by Senator Murray and Congressman Larsen with the snowmobile association.

Finally I would like to add that as science teachers this area serves as a living laboratory for our students who enjoy the beauty of the Wild Sky while also learning lessons about geology, history, culture, ecology and botany. My favorite memory is introducing my students to a wild salmon spawning site, which is one of the few places left in the Cascades where spawning salmon are so numerous that you could walk across the river on their backs. This river's headwaters are in the Wild Sky and it is the wilderness character of the forests along its banks, which still allow for one of the greatest spectacles in nature.

When I am watching this display of nature with my students it often dawns on me that wilderness is not just about the present, but rather is about the preservation of the ancient attributes of nature. I cherish the belief that with federal protection my teenage students will have the ability to share the experience of spawning wild salmon with their grand children. Permanently protecting the Wild Sky country lets this happen. It is a gift to the ages and a powerful legacy of this Congress. And it is my hope that the lowland forest, which makes up the heart and soul of this Wilderness proposal, continue to provide the inspiration to old and young alike, as an integral part of the Wild Sky Wilderness.

In closing I want to commend the members of the Washington State delegation for bringing disparate interests together – from timber companies, backcountry horsemen and environmentalists to residents and elected officials from local communities – to support this legislation. Washingtonians are committed to Wilderness and preserving our State's natural heritage. The members of the delegation deserve thanks for crafting this wilderness bill and for continuing the bipartisan tradition that has been so successful for wilderness protection in Washington State during the last 4 decades. I urge members of this subcommittee to accept the boundaries of the current proposal as modified by our delegation from the original H.R. 822 and advance the Wild Sky Wilderness Bill to the House floor for immediate action.