

U.S. House of Representatives, Sub-Committee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation

Hearing RE: HR 2259, *The North Fork Watershed Protection Act of 2013.*

Prepared Remarks of John Anderson, City Councilor, Whitefish, Montana

Chairman Hastings, Ranking Member DeFazio, members of the Sub-Committee, thank you very much for considering this important piece of legislation, HR 2259: *The North Fork Watershed Protection Act of 2013*. My name is John Anderson. I am from Whitefish, Montana, where I am a City Councilor and where my wife and I are raising two young boys.

When I return to Montana after testifying today, I will spend the weekend hunting with my oldest son on the same lands that are the subject of this bill. It is his first hunting season, so this will be his first time hunting rather than merely accompanying me. We hope to see not only the deer and elk we will be stalking, but also moose, mountain goats, wolves, wolverines, black bears, grizzly bears, and bighorn sheep, all of which are found here in one of our nation's most robust wildlife habitats. This bill will allow local hunters and anglers to enjoy these same lands that bind together not only my family, but also families and communities and throughout the State of Montana.

This bill also provides for the continuation of recreational, livestock, and forest management activities currently allowed on these lands. This is particularly important both to me and to our local economy. Before attending law school, I owned a logging company and made my living with little more than a chainsaw and a team of draft horses. Thanks to this bill, the area's deep logging heritage can continue.

From my perspective, this bill benefits not only the local economy, but also the local taxpayers. As Chairman of the Whitefish Chamber of Commerce during the Great Recession, I witnessed first hand the effects of unpredictability on the local economy. Many of my friends lost their houses, their businesses, and their sense of optimism. Some divorced and many suffered other personal tragedies. The City of Whitefish faced harsh budgetary prospects. Thanks to the Mayor and City Council, a talented City Manager in Chuck Stearns, and a dedicated City staff, Whitefish passed balanced budgets and has not raised property tax rates for the last four years. We have been able to build reserves, stabilize services for our residents, and clear the path for continued success.

As a local official, my focus is on the "blocking and tackling" of government. Our City Council agendas are filled with issues such as repairing sewer lines, filling pot holes, and plowing snow. But perhaps the most basic job of local government is balancing the budget. HR 2259 helps us do that. It protects a significant portion of our watershed, obtained directly from mountain streams in Haskill Basin that run through the lands that are preserved by this bill. If these lands are not safeguarded, and water quality in turn suffers, Whitefish will be faced with spending more money to treat water obtained from Whitefish Lake or other sources. Treating water from the lake costs nearly 2.5 times as much as treating water from the mountain streams. Fortunately, the land above Whitefish Lake is also protected by this

bill. Should this land be mined or subject to heavy extraction activity, the local taxpayers may face rate and tax increases they can scarcely imagine.

That is why this bill makes sense. It enjoys especially broad, local support. A varied cross section of industries, business groups, local governments, hunting and fishing organizations, conservation groups, and the State of Montana have publicized their support. Additionally, the entire Montana Congressional Delegation unanimously supports this bill.

Industry supporters include energy companies such as ConocoPhillips and Chevron and forest product companies such as Plum Creek and Stolze Land and Lumber, the latter of which is headquartered in nearby Columbia Falls, Montana, and is one of the nation's oldest family-owned forest product companies. Our area's largest private employer, Kalispell Regional Medical Center, also supports this bill, as does our world-class ski resort, Whitefish Mountain Resort. Additionally, local chambers of commerce and numerous small businesses support this bill. The small businesses range from long-standing guide services that make their living on these lands to the concessionaire in Glacier National Park, which is adjacent to these lands. The area's largest tribal government, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, also supports this bill, as do the cities of Whitefish and Kalispell as well as local county governments.

In the United States Senate, this bill received unanimous support from the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee without any opposition. I ask that you also unanimously support passage of this bill.

As I mentioned previously, the State of Montana supports this bill. On February 19, 2010, Montana and the Province of British Columbia signed a Memorandum of Understanding to preclude mining, oil and gas development, and coalbed methane extraction throughout the transboundary Flathead region on state and provincial lands in this area. Virtually the entire watershed in British Columbia is provincial property, and the Province of British Columbia has since legislated a mining ban on those lands. On the United States side of the border, some 90% of the North Fork watershed is federally owned. I now ask you to provide the same support to my community and my state as our neighbors to the north have received from their government.

A significant benefit of this bill is that it protects private property rights. It does not affect current leases on these Federal lands. Section 3 explicitly provides that the withdrawal of Federal land is subject to existing rights. Several major energy companies, including ConocoPhillips, Chevron, Andarko, Pioneer, Allen, and Kirms, have voluntarily relinquished their existing leases on these lands. To date, approximately 80% of current leased acreage—more than 180,000 acres—has already been returned to the Department of Interior, free of charge to the American taxpayer.

In closing, I again urge you to unanimously support passage of this important bill. Its importance to my local community is evidenced by its local support. This comes from the people themselves.

That concludes my prepared remarks. Thank you for your attention and for inviting me to speak. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.