

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Hearing on HR 986, the Eightmile Wild and Scenic River Act
Statement of Congressman Joe Courtney
April 17, 2007

Chairman Grijalva, Congressman Bishop and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for scheduling this hearing and allowing me to testify on behalf of Connecticut's Eightmile River and the decade long effort to obtain Wild and Scenic designation by the citizens and communities that abut this precious natural resource.

Later you will hear from Nathan Frohling, the Director of the Connecticut River Program, EightmileRiver Program at the Nature Conservancy. I would just like to spend a few minutes outlining how important this legislation is to the region and the entire state of Connecticut.

The entire Connecticut delegation joined me in a bipartisan effort, cosponsoring HR 986 that would designate the Eightmile River as part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Program. There is a companion bill in the Senate cosponsored by Senators Dodd and Lieberman.

More than 5 years ago, President Bush signed legislation to authorize a study to determine the merits of the Eightmile River's request for inclusion in the Program. While that was the beginning of the federal legislative movement, local citizens from across the three towns of East Haddam, Lyme and Salem had been working diligently for years to plan for how best to protect and preserve the River and its watershed.

The Eightmile River is so-named for the distance between the mouth of the River in East Haddam to Long Island Sound. The 62-square mile watershed is mostly forested area with many rare plant and animal species. It represents an intact aquatic ecosystem that is rare in the Northeast. The National Park Service determined in its study that the Eightmile River met all criteria necessary for Wild and Scenic designation. In addition, all three affected towns passed resolutions in support of this designation, including the support of the relevant land use commissions and boards.

It was decided early on by local citizens to recognize the entire watershed and put together a management plan whereby local, state and federal organizations could voluntarily work to address the needs of the region. Designation would bring funding and staff support to the region in order to preserve the rural character of the region, protect and enhance the diverse plant and animal species, provide small grants to assist local resource activities, ensure adequate outreach and educational opportunities, and maintain water quality.

Although located in a more rural area of the state, the watershed is no less susceptible to unchecked growth and development. At the same time, my legislation preserves the rights of landowners. Language within the bill specifically prohibits the federal government from acquiring land through condemnation, a practice that the National Park Service does not follow anyway, but we took that extra step to be clear.

During the study period, a Management Plan was initiated at the local level based on scientific recommendations and is being implemented at the local level today. Citizens from the three towns voted in support of the Management Plan to preserve this unique area.

As you may know, the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Program will be celebrating its 40th anniversary next year. More than 150 Rivers have been designated Wild and Scenic across the country, including the Farmington River in Connecticut. The Wild and Scenic Rivers is one of the best examples of a public private partnership based on locally – driven priorities and goals.

The citizens of East Haddam, Salem and Lyme and organizations like the Nature Conservancy have committed many years to this endeavor which culminated in votes of support last year. The National Park Service is supportive and I urge the Subcommittee to look favorably on HR 986, the Eightmile Wild and Scenic River Act.