STATEMENT OF JOHN WESSELS, ACTING ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, BUSINESS SERVICES, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, CONCERNING H. 5485, TO AUTHORIZE THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO CONDUCT A STUDY TO DETERMINE THE FEASIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING THE COLUMBIA-PACIFIC NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA IN THE STATES OF WASHINGTON AND OREGON.

September 7, 2006

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to provide the Department of the Interior's views on H.R. 5485, a bill to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study to determine the feasibility of establishing the Columbia-Pacific National Heritage Area in the states of Washington and Oregon.

The Department supports enactment of H.R. 5485. The study would cover four counties close to the confluence of the Columbia River and the Pacific Oceans where there is a wealth of cultural, natural, and scenic resources as well as strong, broad-based local support for protecting and promoting these resources. The study requirements specified in H.R. 5485 are consistent with the criteria for National Heritage Area studies that are included in the Administration legislative proposal for a National Heritage Area program that was transmitted to Congress in July. While the Department supports the authorization of this study, we also believe that any funding requested should be directed first toward completing previously authorized studies. There are currently 29 authorized studies that have not been completed.

Where the mighty Columbia River meets the Pacific Ocean, a unique confluence of American history unfolds. For many millennia, the broad, fog-shrouded, and dangerous Columbia River served as the home to the Chinookan people. Over the years, the Chinook, Clatsop, Willapa, Wiakakum and Cathlamet people developed a rich and complex society based upon trade and the use of the abundant natural resources. These people continue to live and work to keep their culture alive throughout the region.

The entrance yielded to 18 th Century maritime and continental explorers after Captain Sir Frances Drake and Captain Cook sailed off the coast in search of the fabled Northwest Passage. In 1792, the first ship under United States command in the Pacific Ocean, the Columbia Rediviva, was the first non-native ship to enter the mouth of the great river of the west. Captain Robert Gray named the four-mile-wide river after his ship. Two months later, British Captain George Vancouver sailed up the Columbia River and claimed both banks of the river for England. This created international tensions over disputed territory that would remain unresolved for over 50 years.

International commerce flourished as American and European ships sought to trade with the Chinook for furs. Ships would travel around Cape Horn, trade for furs along the Columbia, then sail to China where the furs would be traded for silk, spices, porcelain, and other goods.

In 1805, thirteen years after Captain Gray first entered the Columbia River, the Lewis and Clark Expedition made the first overland journey to the mouth of the Columbia, reaching their destination of the Pacific Ocean. The Expedition wintered at Fort Clatsop and successfully returned home. The Corp of Discovery's arrival and stay is commemorated at the sites of the Lewis and Clark National Historical Park and at state park sites in Washington and Oregon which are working in partnership with the National Park Service to preserve and interpret the Corps of Discovery story.

In 1811, John Jacob Astor established the first permanent American settlement west of the Rocky Mountains, in Astoria. At the outbreak of the War of 1812, Astoria was sold to the British Hudson's Bay Company and was not returned to America until the late 1820's. After more than 50 years of contentious British and American ownership, possession of the region was not resolved until both banks of the Columbia became undisputed United States territory in 1846. Today, Astoria is known for its Historic Districts with Victorian and Craftsman style homes stacked along its steep hillsides with an active working waterfront.

The natural geography of the Columbia River provided a ready-made homeland defense for Native Americans. At the start of the Civil War, the United States Army followed the example of the native people and constructed forts and coastal defenses at the mouth of the Columbia. Fort Stevens, Fort Columbia and Fort Canby (at Cape Disappointment) remained in continuous operation guarding the Columbia River entrance from the Civil War through the end of World War II.

The confluence of the Columbia River and Pacific Ocean has become known as the "Graveyard of the Pacific." Hundreds of ships lay wrecked at the entrance and along the nearby coast. In order to further trade and commerce, the United States has worked for nearly 150 years to make navigation of the Columbia River safe for mariners. Today, the United States Coast Guard serves as the sentinels of the river, where every year they protect thousands of lives and millions of dollars in property.

For the last 200 years, people from all over the world have settled in communities of the region to work in the industries in the area – fishing, canneries, ship outfitting, timber harvesting, milling and transportation, and international trade. These resource-based industries have played and will continue to play a significant role in the region's heritage.

The rich history of this region is set against a backdrop of rugged scenic beauty. It includes the headlands at Ecola and Cape Disappointment State parks, old growth forests in the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge, abundant wildlife in the Lewis and Clark and Julia Butler Hansen National Wildlife Refuges, and miles of gentle beaches on the Long Beach Peninsula and at Seaside Oregon.

The study that would be conducted under H.R. 5485 is estimated to cost between $200,000 and $300,000.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my testimony. I will be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the committee may have.