

Committee on Resources

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Statement of Aaron Reardon Snohomish County Executive

Before the

Subcommittee of Forest and Forest Health
Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives

On
July 22, 2004

Concerning
H.R. 822 Wild Sky Wilderness Act of 2003

Chairman Walden, Representative Inslee and other members of the Subcommittee, I am honored for the opportunity to testify today on such an important issue for Snohomish County and our citizens.

I am testifying today to express my strong support for the Wild Sky Wilderness Act (H.R. 822). This has been an issue that I have followed closely over the last three years as a member of the state House of Representatives, then as a State Senator and now as Snohomish County Executive.

Snohomish County is a special place to live, in large part because of its unique natural heritage. Its varied topography ranges from saltwater beaches, rolling hills and rich river bottom farmlands in the west to dense forest and alpine wilderness in the mountainous east.

The people who live here are equally impressive. Whether from urban areas like Everett or Edmonds or small rural communities in the Skykomish River Valley Cascade foothills like Index and Monroe, Snohomish County residents value our communities, our families and our environment.

Unprecedented Local Support

As a result, the support for the Wild Sky Wilderness is incredibly strong in Snohomish County. Thirty-five current elected officials (both Republicans and Democrats) representing Snohomish County citizens at the city, county and state government levels have enthusiastically endorsed this proposal. More than 30 local businesses located in the Skykomish Valley in the small communities of Monroe, Sultan, Gold Bar, Index and Skykomish, and Baring in neighboring King County, have joined the chorus of support for this proposal.

Of course the support for this proposal is not limited to county boundaries. All told, more than 120 former and current elected officials throughout Washington State have endorsed this proposal. Nearly 70 businesses and more than 50 organizations have also expressed their strong support.

Inclusive Public Process

Moreover, this support has been evident early on and has only grown over the last three years as the proposal has been carefully developed by Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), Representative Rick Larsen (D-WA) and others in the Washington Congressional delegation.

In late summer and early Fall of 2001, before the proposal was even a bill, Senator Murray and Representative Larsen organized two public informational meetings for local citizens who live closest to the proposal. A packed house met in the scenic town of Index adjacent to the proposal and another well-attended public meeting took place in Monroe, the largest city within 15 miles of the proposed area. In true Snohomish County fashion, there was a healthy debate on both sides of the issue, including calls for

protection of an old growth grove that had been left out of the initial proposal and concerns about impacts on snowmobile use.

Other local public meetings took place when the cities of Monroe and Snohomish considered and unanimously passed resolutions in support of the Wild Sky Wilderness bill in 2003. Both city councils talked about the importance of protecting this unique natural treasure to preserve the quality of life that our citizens enjoy.

In Washington, D.C., this proposed legislation has also been carefully reviewed by the public and elected officials. Committees in both the U.S. Senate and the U.S House of Representatives have considered the Wild Sky legislation five times prior to today's hearing.

Senator Murray and Representative Larsen have done an exceptional job of crafting this legislation. It takes into account all sides of the issue, and in particular those raised in public meetings. What stands out in this public process is the thoughtful deliberation by parties on all sides. This began early in the process – even before the introduction of the bill into Congress. For example, language was added after Representative Dunn worked with the Sea Plane Pilots Association. Because of her hard work, the Sea Plane Pilots Association endorses this proposal.

Similar discussions were had to successfully address potential concerns raised by mountain bikers, back country horsemen, timber companies, private inholders, youth groups and disabled individuals. Thanks to the bi-partisan work of the Washington State congressional delegation, this bill has an unprecedented level of public support.

Benefits of a Wild Sky Wilderness to Snohomish County

The Wild Sky Wilderness will bring a host of benefits to the citizens of Snohomish County.

Preserving our Natural Heritage

This proposal will protect 106,000 acres of snow capped peaks, alpine meadows, old growth forests and wild streams and rivers. The north fork of the Skykomish river which runs directly through the proposed Wild Sky Wilderness is one of the most productive salmon streams in the Puget Sound area. As municipal governments struggle to meet the challenge of restoring salmon habitat, preserving this ecologically critical area will go along way to promoting salmon recovery.

Safe & Clean Drinking Water

The wild areas conserved as part of the proposal will ensure the protection of our water and air quality. In many cases safe, clean drinking water depends on permanent protection of wild watersheds. For example, the Wild Sky proposal includes part of the Sultan River basin watershed, which supplies drinking water for the City of Everett and most of the smaller communities in the southern part of the county.

Ray Stephanson, the Mayor of Everett has made this point abundantly clear, "Protecting the Wild Sky area as Wilderness is important for the citizens of Everett. In addition to local economic and recreational benefits, the proposal would permanently protect the headwaters which feed Lake Spada, the primary source for the City of Everett's drinking water."

Quality of life

As the population of Snohomish County grows, permanently protecting wild areas like those in the Wild Sky is critical in order to safeguarding the quality-of-life we enjoy here in the Pacific Northwest. From large cities like Everett to small towns like Index, from as far south as Lynnwood to as far north as Stanwood, this proposal defines the enduring values of our communities. Residents of larger cities also value these wild areas as a welcome escape from the hustle and bustle of urban life.

As Donnetta Walser, the Mayor of Monroe put it, "Wilderness is important to Monroe not just because of the economic opportunities it will bring but also because it is essential to the quality of life that our residents enjoy. We enjoy having a foot in both worlds -- being close to a big city like Seattle while being minutes away from permanently protected mountains, forests and rivers."

Economic benefits

Increasingly, wild areas are critical to sustaining local economies in Snohomish County. Wilderness means jobs – sustainable jobs, in industries like tourism, recreation and vacation rentals that have shown steady growth over the last decade. A recent report, *Prosperity in the 21st Century West*, analyzed federal economic statistics from 400 western counties and found that new businesses, investments and residents tend to locate near public lands. The report found that the better protected those public lands are, the more they contribute to the economic well being of local families and businesses.

For this reason, more than 30 local businesses, ranging from restaurants to sporting goods to vacation rentals have endorsed the Wild Sky Wilderness proposal, in part, because of the expected economic benefits to their businesses. Washington State is renowned for its wild forests which provide world class opportunities to hunt, fish, kayak, horseback ride and relax. These visitors bring thousands of dollars each season to our cities and towns, many of which serve as gateway communities to national forests and wilderness areas.

Kem Hunter, the current Mayor of Index, located adjacent to the proposed Wild Sky Wilderness put it this way, "I've lived in this area for 26 years... I'm interested in an economy that's based upon jobs that stay with us such as those tied to the recreational opportunities that this Wilderness area would protect."

In closing, as one who was born and raised in Snohomish County and now serves in the capacity of its chief elected official, I marvel at the industrious nature and the competitive spirit of our citizens. Whether it's landing the Boeing 7E7 or competing against the rest of the country for 21st century biotech jobs, our citizens know what they want and they go after it.

Snohomish County's citizens are strong willed, independent and earnest. We are that way because of our heritage. From commercial fisherman to loggers, from building the best airplanes in the world or trying to find a cure for cancer, our families have seen the good times and they've learned from the bad. The Wild Sky Wilderness proposal reminds us who we are, from where we've come and why we work so hard.

We work to build a better community for our children and to preserve those values indicative to the Snohomish County spirit. The Wild Sky Wilderness proposal is emblematic of the enduring values of every Snohomish County citizen.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I have a letter from 34 elected officials in Snohomish County who support this bill. I would like to ask that the letter be included as part of the official hearing record.