

**Testimony of Congressman Acevedo-Vilá
In Support of HR 3954
Before the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health of the
House Resources Committee
Wednesday, April 10, 2002**

I want to thank Chairman McInnis, Ranking Member Inslee and all of my colleagues on the Subcommittee for this opportunity to testify in support of the Caribbean National Forest Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 2002.

Many of you are familiar with the Caribbean National Forest, commonly known in Puerto Rico as “El Yunque.” Should you not yet be familiar, I encourage you to visit El Yunque upon your next visit to the Puerto Rico. I am sure you will agree that El Yunque, the only tropical rain forest within the U.S. National Forest System, is a natural wonder and unique resource that we must preserve and protect forever. El Yunque is the only managed rain forest on earth, and with this distinction comes heightened responsibility in my opinion, to fully protect this important resource. The enactment of this bill, along with the wilderness legislation (HR 3955) approved by the Committee last month, will help ensure that the natural integrity of El Yunque is preserved for the 1 million annual visitors to the CNF for generations to come.

HR 3954 would preserve and protect three rivers that flow within the boundaries of El Yunque. It is the intent of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 to preserve rivers and sections thereof to protect the water quality of such rivers and to fulfill other vital national conservation purposes. It is within this intent that I have introduced this bill, and I am fully committed to the preservation of these beautiful rivers. While there are additional rivers within El Yunque that have received wild and scenic designation recommendations, the areas of these rivers are covered under HR 3955 through wilderness designation, or are within the existing Baño de Oro Natural Area. Therefore, I have followed recommendations to focus on rivers running outside of the proposed El Toro Wilderness Area and outside of existing natural areas.

The three rivers that would be designated under this act were all recommended for inclusion under the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System by the revised land and resource management plan for the CNF, approved April 17, 1997. This management plan was the basis for the introduction of this bill, and I ask for your support during its consideration.

The three rivers include the Rio Mameyes, the Rio Icacos, and the Rio de La Mina. All three have outstanding characteristics and make up an integral part of the experience when visiting the forest.

The Rio Mameyes offers outstanding scenic, biological and recreational values to visitors. It flows over large boulders and numerous waterfalls, forming enjoyable pools. Trails run along gorges that descend through the forest. The water quality along the upper segment is optimum, with no interference from human encroachment.

The Rio Mameyes provides important habitat for the Puerto Rican Parrot and Puerto Rican Boa, both endangered species. Furthermore, the endangered Broad-winged and Sharp-shinned Hawks, and the threatened Peregrine Falcon, are also known to use this area. The Mameyes system enjoys the highest natural aquatic diversity and species richness of any forest watershed. The Mameyes remains the only uninterrupted, free flowing river in Puerto Rico.

The Rio de la Mina is judged as eligible based on its outstanding scenic, recreation, biological and historic values. Like the Mameyes, the Rio de La Mina descends over boulders and waterfalls, forming rapids and pools. Trails parallel the river and provide for numerous recreation areas. The most spectacular waterfalls in the forest exist along the Rio de la Mina. These falls, known as La Mina Falls, play an important role in promoting Puerto Rico as a prime vacation destination. The water quality is good within the proposed designation area. The Rio de la Mina also provides habitat for endangered animal and plant species.

The Rio Icacos is judged as eligible based on its outstanding scenic, historic, cultural and ecological values. The Rio Icacos has some of the most varied terrain of any of El Yunque's rivers. Near the headwaters, the gradient is less steep than further downstream where it also descends over boulders and waterfalls. In the upper section, the streambed exhibits a unique sandy bed due to its origin in the upper, flatter section. The palm forest is very striking along the bank, more so than in any other area of the forest. Water quality is high within the proposed designation area. Endangered animal and plant species are present within the proposed area.

I look forward to working with my colleagues on these wild and scenic river designations in El Yunque. Please let me know when and if you will visit the Caribbean National Forest. Puerto Ricans take great pride in El Yunque, and I assure you it is worth the trip to visit.