

**Statement of Lisa Bellefond
Director of Federal Government Relations, The Nature Conservancy of Washington
before the
House Natural Resource Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
July 8, 2008**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of **H.R. 1593** to amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to designate a segment of Illabot Creek in Skagit County, Washington, as a component of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. I am Lisa Bellefond, Director of Federal Government Relations for the Washington Chapter of The Nature Conservancy.

The Nature Conservancy is dedicated to preserving the plants, animals and the natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. The Conservancy has more than 1 million individual members and we have programs in all 50 states and in 30 countries.

Our conservation work is grounded in pragmatism, sound science, partnerships with private, tribal and public landowners, and tangible results in local places. For more than 30 years, The Nature Conservancy has been working in collaboration with partners to preserve the mighty Skagit River. In 1976, the Conservancy and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife created the Skagit River Bald Eagle Natural Area. In winter, bald eagles now gather by the hundreds to feed on returning salmon, inspiring a popular annual festival that boosts the local economy. The project includes another six landowning partners and has preserved more than 9,000 acres of eagle habitat, including more than 10 miles of river and thousands of acres of forests. About 1,300 acres are owned and managed by the Conservancy.

Amending the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to include Illabot Creek, a tributary of the Skagit River, complements the significant investments that have been made at the local level to protect this special area in addition to the salmon and trout recovery efforts within the Skagit basin. This designation would protect water flows and help to ensure that Illabot Creek continues to be a source of cold, clean water to Puget Sound and provide habitat for Steelhead and Bull trout.

Illabot is one of the most important areas for Bull trout in the Skagit Basin, and the Skagit River has the greatest abundance of Bull trout in Washington. Bull trout are the keystone species in this basin. They rely on extremely cold and extremely clean water, so their presence is an indicator of a healthy aquatic ecosystem. .

In Puget Sound, Bull trout are federally listed as threatened, largely because land uses have degraded water quality and warmed the waters once hospitable to Bull trout. But, in places like Illabot Creek, ample cold clean water exists for a "core population" of Bull trout to exist. It is these "core populations" that will be relied upon to reestablish Bull trout and to achieve delisting. Wild and Scenic designation will ensure these fish have undammed, free flowing cold and clean water essential for recovery.

In addition, the lower reach of Illabot Creek and Illabot Slough are especially important habitat for chum and pink salmon, providing some of the highest density spawning habitat in the basin for those species. Mature and old growth forest habitats along the creek provide important bald eagle roosting habitat.

In light of the important fish and wildlife resources in the Illabot Creek watershed and the history of voluntary land protection efforts, The Nature Conservancy supports HR 1593. This Wild and Scenic designation would protect instream flows, complement fish recovery efforts in the Skagit basin, and help protect the investments that private and public land managers have made in protecting Illabot Creek.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important legislation.