

# Committee on Resources

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## Witness Testimony

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### David Young's Testimony Before the House Resources Committee in Support of the American Heritage River Initiative September 24, 1997

Good Morning:

My name is David Young. I am a resident of Asheville, located in western North Carolina. I am here today to speak to you as a citizen, small business owner, local elected official, and as the Chairman of the RiverLink task force spearheading the nomination of the French Broad as an American Heritage River. In all of these capacities, I fully support the American Heritage River Initiative.

Our task force has been following the AHRI since the President announced the program on February 4th. Our task force is comprised of interested citizens, chamber of commerce executives, elected officials from throughout the river basin, riverfront property owners, recreational enthusiast, artists and craftsmen, tourism development experts and non-profit agencies.

We cannot afford to make this a partisan issue. This is a viable program which will help us both develop and preserve our wonderful river. We have over 2,000 endorsements similar to the ones in your packets. We have widespread bipartisan support including Governor of North Carolina, James B. Hunt, Jr., a democrat and Don Sundquist, Governor of Tennessee a republican . We have resolutions by the Henderson County Board of Commissioners, (all republicans) and the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners, (all democrats) all in support of this effort to nominate the French Broad as an American Heritage River.

Our task force has been meeting with officials from Tennessee since the initiative was announced and we have formed a new bond with our sister state. Like the river itself our committee has decided that we will not be bound by superficial state, city or county lines. Rather we will work together, mindful of the fact that we all live upstream and downstream of each other.

Wilma Dykeman, the author of the book The French Broad, is the honorary chairman of our efforts. A native of WNC, Wilma divides her time between her homes in Eastern Tennessee and Western North Carolina. She is the State historian for Tennessee and has written over 17 books and numerous articles that have chronicled the French Broad Region. I know she won't mind me quoting from her book, the French Broad when I describe the French Broad as "a river and a watershed and a way of life where day before yesterday and day after tomorrow exist in an odd and fascinating harmony as a way of life." "The French Broad country, like most of the mountain region which surrounds it, nourishes paradox. That is the source of much of its allure." Over the years our French Broad has become urban and rural, suburban and farmland -- it carries us towards our future yet reminds us daily of our past - of our beginnings.

The French Broad River Basin is the ninth largest river basin in the state of North Carolina covering 2,842 square miles. It is located entirely within the Southern Appalachian Mountains region, west of the Eastern Continental Divide. All waters from the French Broad basin drain to the gulf of Mexico via the Tennessee., Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. The basin includes the highest point in the United States, east of the

Mississippi River, located atop Mount Mitchell (elevation 6,684 feet above mean sea level ). The lowest elevation in the basin is 1,254 feet, mean sea level, where the French Broad River flows into Tennessee. There are 4,113 miles of freshwater streams in the basin and seven lakes, all man-made, greater than eight acres in size. The French Broad river watershed has only three small dams - making it one of the most free flowing watersheds in the county.

On May 1, 1997 RiverLink sponsored a public input session to help gather ideas and develop criteria for the AHRI. We are delighted to see that our suggestions during that May 1 meeting have been incorporated into the permanent criteria for the AHRI. Most notably our suggestion that the designation be given to a broad variety of rivers -- some smaller - some larger. The French Broad may not be the largest river in the United States, or the widest or the longest - but it certainly is one of the most diverse.

During our May 1 public comment period, residents from the two states mixed with elected officials, property owners, businessmen and women, environmentalists, young and old alike --- and you could feel the excitement grow. Our interest in the French Broad is igniting a prairie fire of action and a new spirit of cooperation.

We have all learned quite a bit on our journey of discovery of the French Broad. For example, two areas on the French Broad river - the City of Asheville and Cocke county Tennessee are each celebrating their bicentennial this year. These areas were settled as a direct result of the French Broad. The French Broad has been the region's historic lifeline providing transportation for commerce and routes for exploration. The earliest settlers to the region used the Buncombe County turnpike, which followed the course of the French Broad, to deliver livestock and others goods to and from Tennessee. and Western North Carolina to the seaports in South Carolina.

The French Broad watershed has over 20 archeological sites - some as old as 12,000 years. Our earliest settlers were the Pisgah Culture, ancestors of the Cherokee Nation, utilized the river for religious ceremony, for bathing, for farming, for fishing and for hunting. Hernando DeSoto and his men floated the French Broad River in search of gold in 1540. One of his campsites, built on top of an ancient Indian Mound, in the middle of the French Broad river, is buried today under the Douglas Dam which provides the power source for Oak Ridge -- where man unraveled one of the secrets of the universe and the first atom was split.

The botanical diversity of the French Broad River is unequalled anywhere in the USA, perhaps in the world. 25,000 years ago as the great ice cap formed over Labrador and pushed slowly out across North America, animal and plant life fled before its crushing destruction to our mountain region. Our forests The Pisgah National and the Cherokee National, are richer in variety of trees than the whole of Europe. The French Broad is the area where Northern and Southern vegetation meet and mingle. While all of the northern United States was buried under ice, the trees and plants once native to Canada made their last stand on the heights of the Southern Appalachian -- these tress and shrubs and herbs have never deserted the mountain refuge they found in WNC and Eastern, Tennessee.

Also along the banks of the French Broad at George Vanderbilt's summer home, The Biltmore Estate, the first school of Forestry in the United States was founded in 1898.

During the past decade our focus on the French Broad as a place where people can work, live and play has been intensified under the leadership of RiverLink. RiverLink is a non- profit regional organization dedicated to the environmental and economic revitalization of the French Broad River and its watershed. We view the river as the link -- just as our name indicates --the river is the link to our past and to our

future. The river links our businesses to our neighborhoods, our commercial centers to our recreational amenities. The French Broad is our water source, play space, job creator and major attraction. But above all is a living symbol of our common destiny.

Old warehouses, remnants of the 1920's through 50's industrial riverfront sat empty for many years. Today they are teeming with life once again as artists and craftsmen are reclaiming these historic riverfront buildings for studio and living space. We believe that our efforts to reclaim the French Broad are now paying dividends. The French Broad is featured in the September-October issue of Audubon Magazine as one of three rivers in the United States where the Clean Water Act, coupled with citizen and governmental involvement has resulted in a river that, once again, can sustain human and animal life.

In meetings with our Task Force for the AHRI, we have talked about the possibility of building a greenway from the French Broad's headwaters to where it ends in eastern Tennessee. This won't be any ordinary greenway!! It will encompass two national forests, the Appalachian Trail, the Blue Ridge Parkway, the Biltmore Estate, the NC Arboretum, the Ramsey House in Tennessee, Dollywood, Civil War battle sites, neighborhoods, and industrial, recreational and commercial districts, just to name a few of our attractions. We would like for the greenway to have historical markers and public art interpreting the many and varied events that have occurred on the river's banks. We have also discussed the possibility of reestablishing passenger train service along the French Broad River Gorge. The gorge has some of the most spectacular scenery in the world and tourists and residents alike will marvel at the vistas. We have also spoken of the need for special economic assistance programs for Madison County in North Carolina and Cocke County in Tennessee. These two counties are contiguous and are among the most economically distressed in either of our states.

We will be seeking additional public comment on October 15th at the North Carolina Arboretum and on October 24 at the Cocke County, Tennessee Community Center. We have sent out over 8,000 letters of invitation to attend these public brainstorming sessions and have invited every foundation in western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee to join us as partners as we develop our application to nominate the French Broad as an American Heritage River.

We know that alone, no one entity, no government agency, no foundation, no one person can accomplish all that we have planned for the French Broad. That is why the American Heritage River Initiative is so important -- It gives us an umbrella under which we can continue to build our constituency for the French Broad. We need businesses, and environmentalists, and bankers and boaters and craftsmen and government to sit together and plan for the future. The AHRI umbrella will help us unravel the maze of federal grants and technical assistance opportunities; and will give us access to programs that we don't even know exist.

Our greenway demonstration project at the confluence of the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers is a perfect example of the community coming together to reclaim the river. Our local electric utility company, Carolina Power and Light, donated 1.9 miles of riverfront property as the first link in an urban greenway system. This land had been an unofficial "landfill" - people would clean out their closets, their attics or their basements and bring their discarded items to the river. Today, after years of clean-up work and the cooperation of over 1,300 people, foundations, government agencies, companies and garden clubs the French Broad River Greenway is a wonderful example of what can and does happen when a community comes together in a spirit of cooperation. That's what we believe is the premise of the American Heritage River Initiative - cooperation and coordination with a single vision from the broadest cross-section of the community.

In our efforts to name the French Broad as an American Heritage River we realize that we have already won the prize. We have come together in a whole new way, formed new partnerships and alliances, and discovered our neighbors again, not just nearby cities and counties but our sister state-- Tennessee. There are things that perhaps we should have known, but we didn't.

We support the American Heritage River Initiative because it is non-regulatory and will not cause an increase in the federal budget. Rather, it will focus resources on "OUR plan of action. It gives us an umbrella under which to work. The AHRI will force the federal government to be responsive to "OUR" plan of action for "OUR" river.

In addition to the AHRI promise of no additional regulations for rivers selected, our committee has adopted its own code of conduct in regard to our pursuit of the AHR designation for the French Broad. I would like to read that to you. This was adopted unanimously at our last meeting as an additional and personal guarantee

"We the organizing committee for the AHRI, adopt the following as our personal guarantee and code of conduct in seeking the nomination of the French Broad as an American Heritage River.

We are pursuing the nomination of the French Broad River as an American Heritage River. Our initial plan, along with other aspects, calls for a greenway along the entire length of the French Broad river corridor from Transylvania County to Knox County, Tennessee., which will be interpreted with public art and historic markers. In pursuit of this greenway and the American Heritage River status we pledge individually and collectively that no property will be condemned, no property owners will be coerced and that all participation in the greenway will be voluntary with all due regard for individual "property rights." We understand that our statement and code of conduct is in complete compliance with the stated objectives, goals and American Heritage River Initiative program as outlined in the federal register."

When I am not acting as a county commissioner, or a RiverLink board member or as the chairman of the American Heritage River Initiative I am a small businessman. My wife and I own a travel agency. Over the years our business has grown as our region has been discovered. I know that the national recognition and the coordinated federal services that will accompany the naming of the French Broad as an AHR will bring more people, tourists and businesses to our region. That's good for my business and good for business in general. I invite you to visit our French Broad --- I invite you join us as we applaud the French Broad - and I urge you to support the American Heritage River Initiative.

Thank you for this opportunity to tout the French Broad and to show our regions support for the American Heritage River Initiative.

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