

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Statement

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Florida Department of Environmental Protection
United States House of Representatives
Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands
Hearing on H.R. 2773, Wekiva Wild and Scenic River Act
April 4, 2000

Chairman Hansen and members of the Subcommittee:

I am Fran Mainella, Director of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Recreation and Parks. I am pleased to be here today to represent the State of Florida in support of H.R. 2773, the Wekiva Wild and Scenic River Act.

As you may know, we were delighted recently when Florida's state park system received the National State Parks Gold Medal as the best in America. Within our diverse park system, which includes 152 very special state park units covering more than one-half million acres, there are some extra-special state parks and preserves within the Wekiva River Basin, not far from Orlando--the #1 tourist destination in the world. In my judgment, the Wekiva River also deserves Gold Medal status, by being designated a National Wild and Scenic River.

Located within one of the most famous metropolitan areas in the world, this pristine river system has special significance to Floridians, as well as to the millions of visitors to our state each year. The Wekiva River now has more protection at the state level than any other river in Florida. Among the river's State designations are Outstanding Florida Waters, Aquatic Preserve, State Canoe Trail and State Wild and Scenic River. All that is lacking is its recognition as a National Wild and Scenic River.

To anyone who has paddled a canoe down the Wekiva River, as I have, the experience leaves a lasting memory of beauty and solitude. The river truly embodies the criteria outlined in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act - that is, "free flowing rivers which possess remarkably outstanding scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural or other similar values...shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations."

These criteria are essentially the same guidelines we use in selecting and managing our state parks in Florida. Within the River's basin are some of Florida's finest state parks, including Wekiwa Springs State Park, Rock Springs Run State Reserve and Lower Wekiva River State Preserve. Together, these public lands cover some 40,000 acres and entertained nearly a quarter-million visitors last year.

The mission of the Division of Recreation and Parks is twofold: resource management, about which Mr. McCollum spoke so eloquently in introducing the legislation, and the other

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half of our mission is to provide resource-based recreation at the same time the natural resources are protected.

As Congressman McCollum pointed out in his designation legislation, "The Wekiva River Basin is a complex ecological system of rivers, springs, lakes and streams with many indigenous varieties of vegetation and wildlife that are dependent on this water system." The Wekiva River, Wekiwa Springs and Rock Springs Run are world-class natural destinations, but often in the shadow of the state's world-famous theme parks. Yet, Florida has discovered that our natural areas and the growing popularity of ecotourism and heritage tourism have made Florida a "natural" destination of those seeking nature-based or heritage-based activities.

For years, the state has enthusiastically embraced visitors who "Take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints," and we are finding that our state parks are playing a growing role in Florida's tourism industry. Later this year, we will open Florida's first Nature and Heritage Tourism Center near the Stephen Foster State Folk Culture Center in White Springs only a few miles from Interstate 75. This center, which will include both public and private service providers, will promote and document Florida's natural non-consumptive industry in the future.

Designation of the Wekiva River as the state's second National Wild and Scenic River would give worldwide recognition to the Wekiva River Basin and attract those who seek outdoor recreation in Florida's most authentic and outstanding natural areas. Already, our state parks have an annual economic impact of \$273 million on Florida's local communities, and generate over 8,100 jobs in the state. "Visit Florida" has found that for those travelers to the state by air, Florida's parks and preserves are the #2 destination, led only by Walt Disney World.

The Wekiva River system provides the kind of resource-based recreation we want to encourage and promote, not only to conserve our natural resources and contribute to the state's economy, but most importantly--to preserve and protect our natural areas for the enjoyment generations to come.

I urge your favorable consideration of the National Wild and Scenic River designation for the Wekiva River. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Subcommittee.

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