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PARTNERSHIPS, INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION, VOLUNTEERS, AND OUTDOOR
RECREATION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE
THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
RESOURCES, CONCERNING H.R. 383, TO DESIGNATE THE ICE AGE FLOODS NATIONAL GEOLOGIC TRAIL

July 13, 2006

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on H.R. 383, a bill to designate the Ice Age Floods National Geologic Trail.

The Department opposes H.R. 383 in its current form. Although we recognize the national significance of the geologic features in the Northwest caused by the Ice Age Floods, we believe that we can enhance the interpretation of these features, as described later in this testimony, without establishing a new entity within the National Park Service or spending Federal funds on development of interpretive sites or land acquisition. Devoting limited National Park Service funds to those purposes would detract from the Administration's priority of reducing the deferred maintenance backlog in existing units of the National Park System.

The cataclysmic floods that occurred 12,000 to 17,000 years ago, at the end of the last ice age, were some of the largest ever documented by geologists. These floods, which were caused by the ice and water bursting through ice dams at Glacial Lake Missoula, left a lasting mark of geologic features on the landscape of parts of Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon, and have affected the pattern of human settlement and development in parts of the Northwest.

In 2001, a study team headed by the National Park Service and composed of 70 representatives of a broad range of public and private entities, concluded a two-year special resource study of the Ice Age floods. The study found that the floods features met the criteria for national significance and suitability for addition to the National Park System, but that the size, breadth, and multitude of ownerships throughout the study region make the area not feasible to consider for a traditional national park, monument, or similar designation. However, the study found that it is feasible to interpret the floods story across the affected areas. It evaluated four management alternatives that would each provide a collaborative and coordinated approach for the interpretation of the Ice Age floods story to the public. The study's preferred alternative called for Congressional designation of the floods pathways as a national geologic trail and authorization of National Park Service management of the trail in coordination with public and private entities.

H.R. 383 would largely implement the study's preferred alternative. It would designate the Ice Age Floods National Geologic Trail, to be managed by the National Park Service, along floods pathways. The trail would be an auto tour route along public roads and highways linking floods features starting in the vicinity of Missoula in western Montana, going across northern Idaho, through eastern and southern sections of Washington, across northern Oregon in the vicinity of the Willamette Valley and the Columbia River, to the Pacific Ocean.

While the Department believes that the proposed auto tour route highlighting floods features is a viable concept, we do not support establishing a new program within the National Park Service to lead this effort. Although the study called for sharing the cost of the Ice Age Floods National Geologic Trail among a variety of public and private sources, it estimated that under the alternative that H.R. 383 would implement, the role that National Park Service would play would cost about \$500,000 per year in operating expenses. The study also suggested that the share of capital development costs for the trail from all Federal sources might run between \$8 million and \$12 million over a period of several years.

The study assumed that State and local governments would pay for parcels of land needed for improvements such as roadside pullouts and wayside exhibits where rights-of-way proved inadequate, so it did not suggest a Federal contribution toward land acquisition. However, H.R. 383 would authorize the National Park Service to acquire up to 25 acres of land, which would entail additional Federal expenditures.

Rather than establishing a new entity for the purpose of interpreting the Ice Age Floods, we recommend amending H.R. 383 to provide for expansion of interpretation of floods features at Lake Roosevelt National Recreation Area, an existing unit of the National Park System located in the State of Washington about midway along the route of the trail proposed by H.R. 383. Lake Roosevelt National Recreation Area contains the lake formed by Grand Coulee Dam, built across one of the coulees formed by the Ice Age Floods. The floods are the primary natural history interpretive theme at Lake Roosevelt. The recreation area also assists Washington State Parks in interpretation at Dry Falls State Park, one of the most significant floods features along the proposed trail. As part of an enhanced interpretation program, the park could, for example, make available to park visitors information about other floods features in the four-state region covered by the proposed trail.

The National Park Service is involved in two other efforts, both in Wisconsin, to preserve and interpret the landscapes resulting from the last advance of continental glaciers—the Ice Age National Scientific Reserve and the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. The national scientific reserve, authorized in 1964, preserves outstanding features of the glacial landscape that are owned and managed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources under a cooperative agreement with the National Park Service and is an affiliated area of the National Park System. The Ice Age National Scenic Trail in Wisconsin, authorized in 1980 as a part of the National Trails System, is a 1,200-mile hiking trail that traces glacial landscape features left by the advance and melting away of the last continental glaciers during the Wisconsin Glaciation approximately 15,000 years ago. This scenic trail is a hiking trail and differs from auto tour route that is proposed to be established in this bill as the Ice Age Floods National Geologic Trail.

In addition to expanding interpretation at Lake Roosevelt, the National Park Service could devote resources from other existing programs to promoting education and interpretation of sites associated with the floods. For example, the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program could provide technical assistance to State and local entities that want to enhance interpretation of sites in their areas. And, the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places program could develop Ice Age Floods as one of its "Discover Our Shared Heritage" on-line travel itineraries. In addition, other National Park Service units in the vicinity of the proposed trail, such as the new Lewis and Clark National Historical Park which includes areas along the lower Columbia River, could be brought into the effort to promote interpretation of floods features.

As the National Park Service's study suggested, interpretation of the floods should involve a collaborative and coordinated approach involving a broad range of public and private entities. One of the management alternatives considered by the study was having the state legislatures of Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon designate representatives to a four-state commission that would promote the coordinated interpretation of the floods story at the state and local level. We think that is an option that merits a second look. In addition, with or without a state-sponsored commission, tourist organizations could form a four-state consortium to generate interest in visiting these sites. The Ice Age Floods Institute, a non-profit scientific organization devoted to increasing understanding of the story of the Ice Age Floods, has played and will continue to play a large role in promoting public education about the floods.

We would be happy to work with the committee to develop the appropriate language for amending H.R. 383 to provide for expanded interpretation of Ice Age Floods features by Lake Roosevelt National Recreation Area rather than designation of a new national entity and establishment of a new program managed by the National Park Service.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you or other members of the committee may have.