



**STATEMENT OF BRUCE E. MATTHEWS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE
NORTH COUNTRY TRAIL ASSOCIATION (NCTA), BEFORE THE HOUSE
NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS,
FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS CONCERNING H.R. 481: NORTH COUNTRY
NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL ROUTE ADJUSTMENT ACT OF 2009.**

July 8, 2009

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands of the House Natural Resources Committee, on behalf of the 3000-member North Country Trail Association and the 15,000 members of our partnership and alliance organizations, thank you for this opportunity to further support H.R. 481: North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment Act of 2009. This Act will revise the authorized route of the North Country National Scenic Trail in northeastern Minnesota to include existing hiking trails along Lake Superior's north shore and in Superior National Forest and Chippewa National Forest.

The North Country Trail Association acknowledges and is grateful for the diligence and leadership of Congressman Jim Oberstar and his staff, in whose Congressional District (MN-8) lies the entirety of the area affected by H.R. 481, and who has led efforts to move this legislation forward. We note the active support of the majority of Minnesota's Congressional delegation through their co-sponsorship of H.R. 481, and that of Senator Klobuchar by her introduction of the Senate companion bill, S. 553.

The North Country Trail Association is a non-profit 501(c)3 whose mission is to develop, maintain, preserve and promote the North Country National Scenic Trail through a national network of volunteers, chapters, partner organizations and government agencies. The Association achieves its mission by creating, encouraging and supporting programs of public education, membership services, recreational opportunities and resource and corridor protection in keeping with its Vision for the Trail. Formed in 1981 concurrent with the 1980 Congressional authorization of the North Country National Scenic Trail under the National Trails System Act of 1968 (P.L. 90-543, as amended), the North Country Trail Association (NCTA) is the primary partner of the National Park Service in building and managing the trail as well as growing the trail's grassroots constituency.

With 30 chapters and 11 partnership affiliations along the 4600 mile route of the North Country National Scenic Trail, the North Country Trail Association has a membership totally committed to carrying out Congress's vision in creating a world class footpath illustrating the scenic, historic, cultural and ecological wonders of America's northern heartlands. Composed of rugged, north country-hardy individuals, unique and diverse as the landscapes thus represented, these volunteers are united in paying forward the legacy of a North Country National Scenic Trail worthy of its name, completed in all respects.

To date, volunteers have constructed and are maintaining about 2400 miles of trail, with about 2200 miles remaining to be completed. In 2008 alone, volunteers contributed 57,000 hours of volunteer labor on behalf of the North Country National Scenic Trail. Of important note is the fact that this commitment is a growing one, which for the first time in 2008 exceeded a million dollars in value. Of equal importance is the fact that in the first 30 years of its existence, volunteers of the North Country Trail Association built more miles of North Country Trail than the entire Appalachian Trail is long—the completion of which took the Appalachian Trail over 100 years to accomplish.

With this as backdrop one might conclude that any proposal adding 400 miles to the length of the already longest National Scenic Trail in the National Trails System—the building and maintaining of which is a daunting prospect by any definition—might not be well-received by the volunteers responsible for building it. That the opposite is true simply adds strength to the case for the re-route in northeastern Minnesota as proposed in H.R. 481.

As originally authorized, the route for the North Country National Scenic Trail in northeastern Minnesota carried it across the base of what is known locally as Minnesota's Arrowhead, the triangular-shaped section of northeastern Minnesota bounded by the northern Lake Superior shoreline and the Canadian border. Early on in the history of the North Country National Scenic Trail, with their initial trail-building experiences fresh in mind, the volunteers of the North Country Trail Association recognized there was a far superior alternative to the trail route in

northeastern Minnesota than that originally authorized by Congress.

The feasibility study for the original North Country National Scenic Trail route occurred in the 1960's and 70's prior to its 1980 authorization, with the original route identified between Jay Cooke State Park and the Chippewa National Forest near Grand Rapids. However by the 1980 Congressional authorization local hiking groups had already been building trails in the Arrowhead region that, by the mid-1980's, became known as the Superior, Border Route and Kekekabic Trails. These now-existing trails offered hiking and backpacking opportunities entirely in keeping with the vision of the North Country Trail, in many ways superior to the route plan in the authorizing legislation.

Thus, by 1987 area hiking clubs, outdoors enthusiasts, local communities and the NCTA were requesting that the National Park Service initiate a re-routing study with the goal of including the trails in Minnesota's Arrowhead as part of the North Country National Scenic Trail. These studies and the planning process resulted in a new plan and environmental assessment, approved by the National Park Service in 2004. The enactment of H.R. 481: North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment Act of 2009 would be the final step in designating the inclusion of the Minnesota Arrowhead as part of the North Country National Scenic Trail.

The North Country Trail Association believes the enactment of H.R. 481 is particularly supported by the following key points:

- H.R. 481 will help grow volunteer support. Volunteers are the lifeblood of the North Country National Scenic Trail. The three trails in the Arrowhead to be included in the North Country Trail under H.R. 481—the Kekekabic, Border Route and Superior Hiking Trails— already have a strong and vibrant local volunteer constituency in place, one which actively builds and maintains these trails. In this sparsely populated section of Minnesota these volunteers, already committed to trail building, are a major asset. H.R. 481 further invests these volunteers in the North Country National Scenic Trail, an important consideration in building the remaining miles between Grand Rapids and Ely. Without the inclusion of the Minnesota Arrowhead trails the NCNST stands to lose the efforts and constituency of at least 3000 volunteers.
- H.R. 481 provides for greater savings and cost-effectiveness. Approximately the same amount of new trail will be required under either the original plan (Grand Rapids to Jay Cook State Park) or H.R. 481. The difference lies more in the topography and potential costs associated. The original route includes about 70 to 80 miles of densely wooded wetlands, spruce bogs and tamarack hells, the traverse of which requires the building of extensive boardwalks. On average the materials costs alone for building boardwalk is roughly four to six times that of regular trail. This does not include the value of volunteer labor required to build the trail, which is also far greater due to the time and expertise associated with

constructing boardwalk. Gross cost estimates simply based on materials suggest that the H.R. 481 re-route could save almost \$2 million dollars in materials alone in building this section of trail.

- H.R. 481 is more maintenance-effective. Given the tremendous frost heave potential in one of the coldest regions of the United States, the anticipated annual volunteer maintenance commitments as well as associated repair costs to maintain a passable boardwalk trail are daunting. When compared with the relative upland nature of the Grand Rapids to Ely route the choice is clear.
- H.R. 481 offers greater National Scenic Trail potential. A National Scenic Trail features a journey through the best America can offer in scenic grandeur as well as nationally significant natural, historic and cultural resources. Even with the added 400 miles of hiking required, the opportunity to experience northeastern Minnesota's unique, world-class landscapes far surpasses the alternative of 80 miles of featureless swamp. H.R. 481 provides for the NCNST to more fully realize its potential as a superlative outdoor recreation experience.
- H.R. 481 has extensive support in local communities. Volunteer trail groups, the business community, local government entities and private landowners, are on record supporting H.R. 481. Opposition is virtually non-existent.
- H.R. 481 makes greater use of National Forests. The new route under H.R. 481 will predominantly cross publicly-owned forest lands in the Chippewa and Superior National Forests. The North Country National Scenic Trail will not impede forest management, other land management activities, or motorized recreation. Trail will only be built across private lands with the owner's permission.

With the amendments to P.L. 90-543 as amended by P.L. 111-11, the North Country National Scenic Trail is now authorized to purchase lands for the trail corridor from willing sellers. We support the inclusion of the following language on page 4, line 17 amending H.R. 481 to read

No land or interest in land outside the exterior boundaries of any federally administered area may be acquired by the Federal Government for the trail except with the consent of the owner of the land or interest in land.

The North Country Trail Association believes the enactment of H.R. 481 will more fully carry out Congress's intent for and the promise of the North Country National Scenic Trail and the National Trail System:

Provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through...landforms which exhibit significant characteristics of the physiographic regions of the Nation." (P.L. 90-543, as amended through P.L. 111-11, March 30, 2009)

The North Country Trail Association is grateful for the efforts of many individuals, organizations and agencies who have worked on behalf of and supported this northeast Minnesota Arrowhead re-route initiative. Of particular note are the Superior Hiking Trail Association, Kekekabic Trail Club, Minnesota Rovers/Border Route Trail Association, the Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and the Superior and Chippewa National Forests.

I submit and request that this statement become part of the Congressional record.

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