

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Statement of
Mike Propes, Commissioner
Polk County, Oregon
before
House Committee on Resources
The Honorable Don Young, Chairman
U.S. House of Representatives
Oversight hearings on:
Impact of Federal Land Use Policies on Rural Communities.
Tuesday
June 9, 1998

Mr. Chairman:

My name is Mike Propes. I am chairman of the Polk County Board of Commissioners. I'm also the Vice President of the Association of Oregon and California Revested Railroad Grant Land Counties (O & C Counties), on the Board of Directors of the Association of Oregon Counties, a member of the Willamette Liveability Forum and Chair of two water basin committees.

Polk County's northern boundary is located 74 river miles from the confluence of the Willamette River and the Columbia River and it's southern boundary is 110 river miles from the mouth of the Willamette River. The Willamette River runs along the entire eastern boundary of Polk County. Along the 36 river miles in Polk and Marion Counties we have family and corporate farming, industrial manufacturing, gravel processing operations and residential developments.

We share your concerns about federal policies being developed in Washington, D.C. with little input from rural communities that are most impacted, I offer the following observation quoting from our letter dated August 19, 1997, to Karen Hobbs, Council of Environmental Quality (letter included as an exhibit), "Looking at the AHRI from the 'bottom up', it seems quite obvious that the initiative was developed without an awareness of efforts already underway by regional, state and local citizens in cooperation with federal agencies to protect our rivers. The preliminary meetings involving approximately 690 attendees, held in large metropolitan areas, seems to have been the basis for launching the AHRI. This hardly seems representative of over 225 million people on this matter, and thus seems to have been spawned from an inadequate understanding of the need or want of both the citizens and the rivers."

The President announced the American Heritage River Initiative proposal in his 1997 State of the Union speech. The President said that designated rivers would be eligible for "focused federal support" in the form of information, technical expertise and streamlined access to federal money available in existing programs. The President also said, "there will be no federal mandates, no regulations and no restrictions on property holders' rights." It is alleged to be a volunteer program and supposedly largely symbolic that needs broad public support to help states cut through federal red tape. Since the President's announcement Congress pressured the Council on Environmental Quality office to extend the public comment period, the President

announced that they were accepting American Heritage River nominations, and Senator Gordon Smith wrote to the CEQ expressing his opposition to designation of rivers in Oregon. Twenty-four counties have passed resolutions requesting to be excluded from consideration of listing under this initiative until such time that specific information is available to determine the cost and benefits of having a river designated in their county.

Two rivers in Oregon, the Willamette and Columbia County portion of the Columbia, have been nominated as American Heritage Rivers. An article in the May 19, 1998, Oregonian stated, "the Willamette looks like a strong contender for the American Heritage Rivers list." With two Portland area men named to an advisory committee to make recommendations to the President, the Willamette River's chances of being one of the 10 rivers included in the first round of the program is a good bet.

The program is supposed to be voluntary, but it appears that these designations will occur in spite of strong opposition from local governments. This is the first promise broken with respect to the AHRI. Broken promises seem to be a pattern with this administration's environmental initiatives.

Four counties along the Willamette River, Lane, Linn Polk and Yamhill, have asked to be excluded from an AHRI designation until specific financial benefits and potential consequences associated with a listing are known. To this date, the response to our request for more detailed information has been a deafening silence. As county commissioners we believe that healthy rivers are in the best interests of our river community residents, but we need to know that a new bureaucracy unleashed with vague and unclear goals, guidelines and objectives will respect the authority of local elected officials and the private property rights of citizens living along our rivers.

Recently at the National Association of Counties, Western Interstate Regional Conference in Juneau, Alaska, presentations by U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management urged local governments to trust them. They spoke of the need for the road building moratorium on federal land and decoupling/delinking of timber receipts from county payments so they could work on the roads they want to keep and people wouldn't have the perception that timber harvest was being increased because of pressure brought on by county government to increase revenue. They said they are flexible, but both issues are non-negotiable by this Administration. They said "trust us", in the long term it's in your best interest. They have not shown us that the road moratorium will be in our interest. We think it will only limit the access to federal land in our counties, and we know that decoupling/delinking timber receipts from county payments is not in our long-term interest. This is not the way you earn and build trust with your partners. So how can we trust this Administration when they say all they want to do is encourage community-led efforts to spur economic revitalization and protect our natural river resources by cutting through federal red tape without creating new regulations. We don't think so. By June or July we will know if the Willamette River will be listed as an American Heritage River. Maybe after the listing we will know more about the benefits and consequences that go along with a listing.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today.

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