

**STATEMENT OF KATHERINE STEVENSON, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR FOR CULTURAL RESOURCES STEWARDSHIP AND PARTNERSHIPS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION AND PUBLIC LANDS OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, CONCERNING H.R. 3858, THE NEW RIVER GORGE BOUNDARY ACT OF 2002.**

**May 16, 2002**

Mr. Chairman, thank YOU for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on H.R. 3858, a bill to expand the boundary of the New River Gorge National River by 1,962 acres and to exchange approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  acre of private land with an adjacent private landowner.

The Department is unable to support H.R. 3858 in its entirety at this time. The Department would ask that Congress defer action on subsection (a), regarding a boundary adjustment, until additional planning addressing the acquisition and costs of additional lands at New River Gorge National River has been completed. The Department does however support subsection (b) of H.R. 3858 as it provides for an even land exchange involving no cost or nominal cost.

This legislation proposes to adjust the boundary of New River Gorge National River to include seven tracts of land encompassing 1,962 acres. The addition of these lands within the park's boundary would complete the rim-to-rim acquisition of lands on both sides of the gorge, permanently protecting its outstanding scenery in accordance with the legislation that originally designated the park. However we have not yet completed a formal study with public involvement to determine the appropriateness of including these lands within the park.

The last provision of this bill proposes a land exchange and boundary modification with an adjacent local

landowner for a parcel of land, approximately <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> acre in size, of equal value and equal size. This resolves an issue of private property encroachment and as a result the boundary is slightly altered, but there is no net change in the authorized acreage.

New River Gorge National River was established in 1978 to conserve and protect 53 miles of the New River as a free-flowing waterway. This unit of the National Park System encompasses over 70,000 acres of land along the New River between the towns of Hinton and Fayetteville. The park and surrounding area are rich in cultural and natural history, with an abundance of scenic and recreational opportunities. The New and Gauley Rivers offer world-class whitewater boating, rock climbing, and fishing. The New River Gorge Bridge is the longest single span arch bridge in the world, and the second highest bridge in the United States. The New River Gorge has the most diverse assemblage of plant species of any river gorge in the southern Appalachians, it possesses considerable animal diversity, and is the state's leading warm-water fishery. Cultural resources include significant archeological sites as well as 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century historic resources, towns, and commercial centers related to mining and transportation of coal, that played an important role in America's industrial history. New River Gorge National River is located within the National Coal Heritage Area (1996), and the New River is one of 14 rivers designated an American Heritage River (1998).

All of the lands included in the proposed boundary adjustment are currently under private ownership and we understand that all six private landowners are willing sellers. Two of the tracts proposed for inclusion contain approximately 648 acres of steep, wooded slopes within the gorge, and are adjacent to Hawk's Nest State Park. The two other parcels, totaling 52 acres, provide access to an area that is heavily used by rockclimbers and other visitors. The remaining two parcels would add 1,262 acres along the rim of the gorge. Completion of the planning process at New River Gorge National River will ensure that there is

adequate public review regarding our land acquisition needs.

As you know the Department is committed to the President's Initiative to eliminate the National Park Service's deferred maintenance backlog. The planning process would also address the land acquisition, operations, and development costs of the lands proposed for addition. We estimate that the addition of 1,962 acres within the boundary would require no less than \$2 million in additional land acquisition funds. It is possible that several of the tracts of land proposed for acquisition would be maintained in an undeveloped condition and therefore have minimal administrative costs associated with them. However one tract may require some development to provide adequate accommodation for the high levels of public use.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. This concludes my prepared remarks. I would be glad to answer any question that you or members of the subcommittee might have.

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