

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Witness Statement

STATEMENT OF KATHERINE STEVENSON, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR FOR CULTURAL RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP AND PARTNERSHIPS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES CONCERNING H.R. 2140, A BILL TO IMPROVE PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER NATIONAL RECREATION AREA IN THE STATE OF GEORGIA

JULY 20, 1999

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on H.R. 2140, to improve protection and management of the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area.

The Department strongly supports this legislation, with one technical amendment. In fact, the Administration recently submitted to Congress legislation nearly identical to H.R. 2140.

Mr. Chairman, Congress established the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area in 1978 to preserve and protect the natural, scenic, recreational, historic, and other values of a 48-mile segment of one of our nation's great urban rivers. Six years later, in 1984, as development around and within the recreation area increased, Congress acted to facilitate State and local government efforts to protect the area by declaring the 2,000-foot-wide corridor adjacent to each bank of the Chattahoochee an area of national concern.

Since that last action fifteen years ago, the pace of residential and commercial development in the Chattahoochee River corridor has accelerated rapidly. In fact, a U.S. Census Bureau report issued recently named Forsyth County, where the recreation area boundary begins, the fastest-growing county in the nation. The three other counties in which the recreation area lies are also experiencing a surge in growth. Due to the tremendous demand for outdoor recreational opportunities and the intense development pressures on the remaining open space in the Chattahoochee River corridor, we believe it is essential to pass new legislation to provide additional protection for this important resource, and to do so as quickly as possible.

Several years ago, the National Park Service joined with several conservation organizations to map out a strategy to address the need to preserve remaining undeveloped land and expand the land base for recreational use at Chattahoochee. We agreed that a boundary study was needed to evaluate what lands could still be protected, along with a plan for their protection.

The Trust for Public Land undertook this study for the National Park Service. Through the course of the study, it became apparent to the counties and municipalities within the Chattahoochee River corridor that establishing links between the separate units of the national recreation area could meet the goals of providing recreational opportunities for their residents while protecting some of the remaining open space along the 48-mile segment of the river.

These local governments, along with the State government, private foundations, and other private entities have become enthusiastic supporters of the proposed expansion and are willing to contribute substantially to the cost of acquiring the land needed to link Chattahoochee's separate units if Congress provides the necessary authority to expand the land base, along with \$25 million for land purchases. Congress did, in fact, make available \$25 million for land acquisition at Chattahoochee last year, and a private philanthropic foundation has now matched that amount in full.

Contributing to the need for a larger land base for the recreation area is the fact that visitor use at the park has largely shifted from water-based to land-based activities. When the recreation area was first created, people flocked to it to

raft, float, canoe, and kayak down the river. These are still popular activities; however, the use of park lands for hiking, biking, picnicking, and other such land-based activities has increased dramatically as the area's population has grown. The Cochran Shoals unit, for example, which includes a fitness trail, has more than two million visitors annually. Thus, expanding the recreation area would enable the National Park Service to better serve the majority of visitors who now use the park for land-based activities.

Mr. Chairman, H.R. 2140 would provide the foundation for a cooperative effort by the Federal government, the State of Georgia, local governments, and private entities to link the separate units of the recreation area, protect much of the remaining open space along the 48-mile Chattahoochee River corridor, and provide additional recreational opportunities in that area. It would expand the size of the land base of the park from approximately 6,800 acres to a maximum of 10,000 acres. The boundary revision would add undeveloped land within the 2,000-foot river bank corridors, while excluding some properties currently within the boundary that are no longer suitable for the park. Once the boundary is finalized, it would be submitted to the House Resources Committee and the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources for final approval.

The Department of the Interior strongly supports the legislation as introduced, with one technical change. Section 2(d)(1) of H.R. 2140 authorizes appropriations of \$25 million for fiscal years after 1998. The intent of this provision, which was carried over from a version of the bill introduced in the 105th Congress, was to limit the Federal government's contribution to the acquisition of the new areas added by the boundary change to \$25 million. We agree that the Federal share of the cost of the new land should be limited to that amount, which, as I noted earlier, has already been appropriated.

However, a simpler way to achieve the same objective would be to raise the existing authorization for land acquisition at Chattahoochee to the level that reflects the total amount that has been appropriated to date, including the \$25 million provided from funds appropriated for fiscal years 1998 and 1999. Thus, we would recommend amending Section 2(d)(1) to authorize \$115 million land acquisition, just slightly more than the \$114.5 million that has been appropriated since the recreation area was authorized in 1978.

I would also like to take this opportunity to note that the Department strongly supports the bill in its current form with respect to land acquisition authority. As you may recall, the version of this legislation reported by the House Resources Committee last year provided that new areas added to the recreation area through the boundary expansion could not be acquired by the National Park Service without the consent of the owner. That provision was a departure from the existing authorization for Chattahoochee, which has no prohibition on the use of condemnation for land already within the boundary.

Although condemnation authority at Chattahoochee exists, it has never been used, and we hope it never will be. However, it is possible that there will be cases of potentially severe and irreparable damage to the resource that can be stopped only through the power of eminent domain. The goal of H.R. 2140 is to allow the creation of as much of an uninterrupted stretch of land as possible along each bank of the river in order to meet the huge and growing demand for open space and recreational opportunities that communities along the river want. Eminent domain, which would be used only as a last resort, is a tool that the Park Service needs to have to ensure that the goal of this legislation is fulfilled to the greatest extent possible.

This concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. I will be happy to respond to questions from you or other committee members.

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