

**Statement of Steve Thomas, Northern Plains Regional Field Director
Sierra Club**

Regarding the Gateway Communities Cooperation Act of 2002

**Submitted to the National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands Subcommittee
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. This is certainly a topic worth discussing. I will try to establish by my testimony that the result of this legislation will be the "control" of National Parks rather than "cooperation". My name is Steve Thomas, and I live in Sheridan, Wyoming. I served 2 terms as a Teton County Commissioner in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where I owned and operated a grocery store for many years. I also served, at the request of Wyoming's governor, on the "Tri-State Grizzly Conservation Committee" and the "State of Wyoming Grizzly Bear Management Committee". I presently serve on the Board of Directors of the "University of Wyoming Institute for the Environment and Natural Resources". For the past year, I have been employed as the Northern Plains Director of the Sierra Club. I offer this background to you to illustrate my extensive past and current involvement with issues involving the National Parks and Forests.

During the years that I operated my store in Jackson, Wyoming, I was dependent on Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks for my livelihood. Many people in gateway communities surrounding National Parks are in a similar situation. I must say, however, that I always felt I was very fortunate to be in business in such a situation. With some 3 million people blowing through Yellowstone every year, it would be darn hard not to make it in the tourist business. I also always felt that we adjacent to the Parks had much greater impacts on the Parks than they did on us. As long as the Park Service protects the natural wonders and wildlife, people will always come to Yellowstone. You see, it is not the towns on the borders of the Park that people come to visit but rather the Parks themselves. Yes, we were indeed fortunate to live in a gateway community and to be able to benefit from the cash cows that National Parks are for surrounding communities and states.

Now, I agree that citizens in these communities should be able to access the Parks' planning process just like other Americans. But you know something, those of us that live in these communities already have superior access than the citizens of the rest of the Country. When I lived in Jackson and was a County Commissioner, I could walk down the street and visit with the Supervisor of the Bridger Teton National Forest. On the way there, I could stop off and visit the Superintendent of the National Elk Refuge. Then I could get in my car and drive 14 miles to visit with the Superintendent of Grand Teton National Park. All of these people I knew on a first name basis. In fact, I found them to be very open to my concerns and ideas. I had great influence in decisions - much more than other citizens across the Country. This is not to say that I always agreed with their decisions, but I did not need special statutory authority to be involved with the Parks' planning process. I think it would be a shame to elevate local officials in gateway communities even further than they already are above the average citizen who also has a great stake in what happens in our National Parks.

When I was a County Commissioner, I never thought that Grand Teton or Yellowstone was a County Park. These Parks exist to protect natural wonders and for the enjoyment of all citizens of this Nation, not just those of us who

are fortunate enough to live nearby. The key word here is NATIONAL. These spectacular places are a source of pride and wonder for the people of this Country. The Parks primary purpose is not for people like me to make money. That is one of the points I would like to make regarding elevating local elected officials to a higher level than average citizens: if you elevate local officials of gateway communities, many of whom have an indirect commercial interest in these Parks, you will heighten an already extensive and powerful local economic influence in Park decisions.

Let me cite a glaring example of this local economic influence. Snow machines. Nearly everyone admits that snow machines are polluting Yellowstone and Grand Teton Parks, causing severe problems with wildlife and other Park values. The Park Service, as well as the EPA, has conducted exhaustive studies regarding these machines and their impacts. All conclude that these machines should be banned from the Parks. Yet, the surrounding five Counties and three states have mounted a campaign for purely economic reasons to keep these machines in the Parks. Even in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence that these machines harm the Parks and despite overwhelming public support for banning snow machines, local officials have exercised their substantial influence to keep these machines in the Parks.

The 4 County resolutions I have submitted to the Committee provide you with another example of what can happen when local control is increased. Keep in mind that Counties in Wyoming adopt law by resolution, so the 4 resolutions submitted to you have the force of law in Wyoming and, also, that these Commissioners maintain that their county governments have jurisdiction over all public/federal lands in their County, including the Wind River Indian Reservation. Three of these resolutions were adopted by the Fremont County, Wyoming, Commissioners purportedly to outlaw grizzly bears, wolves, and any other wildlife species that the Fremont County Commissioners deem "undesirable". The 4th resolution prohibits the Forest Service from adopting food storage rules which help protect forest users from bears and other wildlife. The Commissioners instructed the Sheriff to enforce these resolutions by "any means necessary" and instructed citizens to ignore the Forest Service's food storage rules. Oh, incidentally these resolutions were adopted without prior notification to the public, so county residents had no opportunity to have input. Similar resolutions have been adopted by other gateway local governments in Wyoming.

I cite these resolutions to illustrate the real world in western Wyoming regarding natural wonders and how certain local elected officials regard them. Enforcement of these local laws would extirpate endangered species from the entire County just at a time when the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service is thinking of removing these animals from the Endangered Species List and after the Federal Government has spent millions of dollars on the protection and recovery of these animals. Also, killing or removing grizzly bears or wolves would be in stark contrast to the wishes of the people of the United States who have largely supported recovery and protection of these animals in the Yellowstone area. Now, I know that these local officials claim they did not have enough input into the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan and, thus, they need the bill before you today to protect their interests. But I am here to tell you that we invited them to participate with the Governor-appointed "Citizens Bear Management Committee", and they chose not to show up. We even held all the meetings in Fremont County, Wyoming, and still they chose not to participate. The point is that local officials in certain gateway communities are not interested so much in cooperation as they are in increasing their already substantial influence in Park decisions and taking control of the National Parks.

As for the provision in the legislation being considered by this Committee to provide funding for gateway communities to participate in a Park's planning process, the Counties in the West with large tracts of federal lands already get huge federal subsidies in the form of Payment-in-Lieu-of-Taxes (PILT) and other sources of federal government funding. In Teton County, Wyoming, we split all sales taxes collected inside Yellowstone with a 2nd gateway County, and we kept all the sales taxes from Grand Teton National Park. This resulted in hundreds of thousands of dollars in income per year for our County. We did not have to provide any services for the Parks except a couple of ballot boxes for Park employees to vote. They even paid us for trash disposal. I used to call it "manna from heaven". Just think, there is only 3% of Teton County that is privately owned, and the rest is public lands including Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks; yet, we collected taxes from all those lands for doing nothing. For example, we did not maintain roads, we did not provide law enforcement, we did not provide fire protection, and we did not have to do any of the administrative activities we did for the rest of the County. Such a deal!

Finally, exactly how would the Park Service implement this proposed legislation? If all incorporated gateway cities and all gateway counties are elevated to Cooperating Agency status, Parks such as Yellowstone with 5 gateway Counties and at least 10 gateway incorporated cities would have 15 people that would be "cooperators". This would mean that, as a group, local officials' influence would be even more disproportionate to that of other citizens of the Country.

In summary, this legislation is not about cooperation but rather about control. The cooperation that the agency presently demonstrates with local officials already goes above and beyond the call of duty. What certain Counties are angry about is that they do not get their way all of the time. While I may have disagreed with certain Park decisions, I respected their professional ability to manage the Park, and I knew that I did not have the expertise to do that. As a former gateway County Commissioner, I recognize gateway government officials already have more influence over Park decisions than all other citizens of this Country. It is important for you to recognize that many times the interests these local officials represent conflict with Park values as demonstrated by the snowmobile and the endangered species issues I cited previously. Management authority over the Parks is properly vested with the Park Service in cooperation with other federal agencies, all of whom are required to protect national interests. Certain County officials who seek to pollute a Park's resources and kill every species of wildlife they dislike obviously should not be given increased influence and control over Park decisions.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify.