

BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
RESOURCES COMMITTEE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

TESTIMONY CONCERNING PROPOSED S.56 RIO GRANDE NATURAL AREA

RAY WRIGHT, PRESIDENT
RIO GRANDE WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

March 9, 2006

TESTIMONY ON BEHALF OF THE RIO GRANDE WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT, BEFORE
THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH.

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S.56 would authorize the creation of the Rio Grande Natural Area in south central Colorado, in order to promote the protection and restoration of the riparian zone of the Rio Grande between the Alamosa Wildlife Refuge and the Colorado and New Mexico Stateline.

• Testimony of Ray Wright

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. I am Ray Wright, President of the Rio Grande Water Conservation District which is located in Colorado's San Luis Valley. The San Luis Valley encompasses six counties in south central Colorado and is a high mountain valley in the south central part of the State which is drained by the Rio Grande. The Rio Grande and its tributaries rise in the San Juan Mountains and are fed almost exclusively by snowmelt. From the mountains the Rio Grande flows into the San Luis Valley, across the Valley floor, and then south into New Mexico. The San Luis Valley has an average elevation of more than 7,000 feet above sea level and is about 100 miles north to south and 75 miles east to west. Portions of the Valley floor receive an average of only seven inches of precipitation per year, while the surrounding mountains receive precipitation principally in the form of snow that averages more than 30 inches of moisture annually. More than 70% of the annual flow of the Rio Grande and its tributary streams occurs in a three or four month period, from early May to the end of July. There is a map at the back of our testimony that shows the precipitation distribution in our area.

There are approximately 600,000 acres of irrigated farmland in the San Luis Valley which depend upon the waters of the Rio Grande and its tributaries for irrigation supplies. The great majority of the irrigation systems were privately constructed more than 100 years ago and remain privately operated today. The San Luis Valley grows some of the finest potatoes in the United States as well as small grains, alfalfa and grass hay, and vegetables, such as lettuce and carrots. Along the Rio Grande, near the city of Alamosa in the center of the Valley is the Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge. There is another map at the back of our testimony which shows the location of the San Luis Valley in Colorado as well as a smaller scale map showing the location of the proposed Natural Area.

The water of the Rio Grande and its tributaries is the subject of an Interstate Compact between the states of Colorado, New Mexico and Texas that was signed in 1938. The Compact apportions the waters of the Rio Grande using an inflow/outflow technique under which the native flows of the rivers coming out of the mountains are measured and Colorado's obligation to make deliveries to New Mexico are calculated as a percentage of that inflow. Every year, there are deliveries to New Mexico as required by the Compact, although the quantities vary significantly from years of severe drought to years with extremely high water conditions. As the result of Compact required deliveries, there is always water flowing in the Rio Grande south of Alamosa.

In the southern part of the San Luis Valley, the Rio Grande flows across the broad, relatively treeless valley floor, where the vegetation consists primarily of sage and other sparse, drought resistant plants. Only along the River are there significant amounts of willow and cottonwood. More than half of the land bordering the River is in private ownership, with the rest being controlled by the Bureau of Land Management. In many places, the riparian zone along the River is degraded because of past land use practices, on both private property and BLM lands.

For a number of years, federal, state and local officials have looked for a way to restore and protect the riparian zone of the River without creating a management structure that would conflict with the long-standing water uses upstream in the San Luis Valley. Our agricultural economy is more than a century old and it is very important to maintain our ability to continue to

use water for the benefit of our residents and those who use our agricultural products.

We believe a federal designation of a Natural Area along the Rio Grande as proposed in S.56 will permit the cooperative restoration and protection of the River corridor by both the private and public landowners. The Natural Area Legislation before you today provides for the creation of a Commission made up of federal, state and local stakeholders whose charge is to develop a management plan for submission to the Secretary of the Interior that establishes the procedures that will be used to restore and protect the Area. Participation by private landowners in the plan is encouraged, but it is entirely voluntary.

Because of the Compact delivery requirements, this bill would recognize that no implied or Federal reserved water rights would be required for the Area, thereby eliminating potential conflicts between the federal land management agency and the upstream private water right holders. The Board of County Commissioners of all of the counties in the San Luis Valley have voted unanimously to support the Natural Area legislation. We believe the ability to create cooperative, win-win solutions such as this are few and far between, but in this instance there is a willingness on the part of local government, state government, citizen groups, affected landowners as well as local federal agency representatives to work together for the benefit of the Valley and its environment. We are in agreement that the Natural Area proposed by this bill is in all of our interests. All we need now is your support.

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Rio Grande Water Conservation District as well as the Boards of County Commissioners of the counties in the San Luis Valley: Costilla, Conejos, Alamosa, Rio Grande, Sagauche and Mineral, we ask that you favorably consider S.56 and give us the opportunity to restore and protect the riparian zone of the Rio Grande in a way that does not create conflicts between the interests of federal agencies and the interests of the citizens of our community. We would specifically like to thank Congresswoman Musgrave for the support of this legislation. Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear before you today.