

STATEMENT

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

NOVEMBER 5, 2009

CONCERNING

H.R. 2476, TO AMEND THE NATIONAL FOREST SKI AREA PERMIT ACT OF 1986

AND

H.R. 1769, TO EXPAND THE ALPINE LAKES WILDERNESS IN THE STATE OF WASHINGTON, TO DESIGNATE THE MIDDLE FORK SNOQUALMIE RIVER AND PRATT RIVER AS WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES

Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the views of the Department of Agriculture on H.R. 2476 and H.R. 1769. I have submitted my testimony for the record and appreciate this opportunity to provide a summary of key points.

H.R. 2476, To Amend the National Forest Ski Area Permit Act of 1986

The Administration supports this legislation with technical amendments. We would appreciate the opportunity to work with the Committee to refine the bill to provide the appropriate natural resource-based experience for visitors to the National Forests while ensuring the protection of the natural environment.

Background and Need for Legislation

The National Forest Ski Area Permit Act of 1986 does not address activities other than Nordic and alpine skiing and their ancillary facilities. There are 121 ski areas operating under permit on national forests. For many Americans, ski areas are portals to our national forests and a means to greater appreciation of the natural world.

We are concerned about trends showing a decline in appreciation and understanding of the natural environment among our youth. Ski areas continue to introduce youth and other novice users to healthy, outdoor recreation experiences. Expanding opportunities for year-round use

will encourage more of the increasingly urban public to experience and appreciate the national forests.

Ski areas are some of the most developed sites on the national forests. Focusing more of the developed outdoor recreational activities in these areas is appropriate and could reduce negative impacts in other areas of the national forests by channeling use to these highly managed areas.

Recommended Changes to H.R. 2476

We would like to work with the committee to develop amendments to further define appropriate facilities for the natural resource settings we manage. For example we would like to exclude facilities such as amusement and water parks, golf courses, tennis courts, and skateboard parks.

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In addition to listed exclusions, if H.R. 2476 is enacted, we would develop criteria to provide a basis for case-specific proposals at the local level in accordance with established law, regulations and procedures.

In summary, this legislation would encourage greater recreational use of the National Forests, concentrate highly developed recreation in those areas that are currently among the most developed sites on national forests, and enhance the long term viability of these ski areas and the adjoining rural economies. For these reasons, the legislation is a positive step and one which the Administration supports, with the suggested clarifications.

H.R. 1769, Alpine Lakes Wilderness, Pratt and Middle Fork Snoqualmie Wild and Scenic River

We want to thank the delegation for its collaborative approach and local involvement that have contributed to this bill. The Department supports this legislation in concept and we would like to work with the Committee to address some technical issues.

Alpine Lakes Wilderness

The existing 394,000 acre Alpine Lakes Wilderness is one of the jewels of our wilderness system. Trails accessing the area are among the most heavily used in the Northwest as they lead to some exceptionally beautiful destinations. The proposed additions to the Alpine Lakes Wilderness would expand this area by about 22,000 acres in the valleys of the Pratt River and the Middle and South Forks of the Snoqualmie River.

We would like to work with the subcommittee to address some technical aspects of the bill.

These include:

- Modifying the boundary along the Middle Fork Snoqualmie Trail, a popular mountain bike trail, in order to allow for continued bicycle use and for trail relocation if needed.
- Excluding the first three miles of the Pratt River trail along the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River to allow existing high use levels to continue. This would also allow any potential trail relocation, if needed, for the currently scheduled trail reconstruction project.

- Relocating the northwestern boundary of the wilderness so that only National Forest System lands are included.

Wild and Scenic Rivers

The Pratt and Middle fork Snoqualmie Rivers that would be designated under this bill were studied in the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Plan and determined to be a suitable additions to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, based on their outstandingly remarkable recreation, wildlife, fisheries and ecological values.

The Department has one concern related to the planned reconstruction of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Road. We would like to work with the committee to ensure nothing in this legislation would preclude timely completion of the project on which the Forest Service and the Federal Highway Administration have invested nearly twenty years and three million dollars.

In summary, the Department supports both the additions to the Alpine Lakes Wilderness and the designation of the Wild and Scenic River as quality components of the Wilderness Preservation and National Wild and Scenic Rivers Systems, with the technical corrections noted.

This concludes my prepared statement and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.