

STATEMENT OF STEPHEN E. WHITESELL, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PARK PLANNING, FACILITIES, AND LANDS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS, CONCERNING H.R. 3785, TO AUTHORIZE THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO CONDUCT A STUDY OF THE SUITABILITY AND FEASIBILITY OF EXPANDING THE BOUNDARY OF THE CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER NATIONAL RECREATION AREA.

JUNE 10, 2010

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior on H.R. 3785, a bill to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study of the suitability and feasibility of expanding the boundary of the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area and for other purposes.

The Department supports H.R. 3785. However, we believe that priority should be given to the 45 previously authorized studies for potential units of the National Park System, potential new National Heritage Areas, and potential additions to the National Trails System and National Wild and Scenic River System that have not yet been transmitted to the Congress.

H.R. 3785 would authorize a study to determine whether any or all of the lands along 45 miles of the Chattahoochee River corridor, from the existing southern boundary of the recreation area to the junction of Coweta, Heard, and Carroll Counties, would be appropriate for inclusion in the Chattahoochee National Recreation Area. Adding these lands to the national recreation area, which would require an act of Congress, would provide communities along the river corridor to the southwest of Atlanta the same kinds of resource protection and outdoor recreational opportunities that communities along the river north of Atlanta currently enjoy.

In establishing the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area in 1978, Congress determined that the "natural, scenic, recreation, historic, and other values of a forty-eight-mile segment of the Chattahoochee River and certain adjoining lands in the State of Georgia from Buford Dam downstream to Peachtree Creek are of special national significance, and that such values should be preserved and protected from developments and uses which would substantially impair or destroy them." Boundary expansions enacted in 1984 and 1999 increased the authorized boundary of the park from its original limit of 6,300 to 10,000 acres. The park consists of a series of 15 land units, totaling 6,500 acres, along the 48-mile stretch of river. People use the park to hike along the river banks, float down the river, relax, picnic, and enjoy nature. Visitation at the national recreation area in 2009 was more than 2.8 million, making it the most heavily visited national park unit in the State of Georgia.

There is strong local interest in protecting open space along the river south of the recreation area's current boundary. A coalition of stakeholders in the counties along the river southwest of Atlanta has launched several initiatives to protect the undeveloped countryside in this region. The City of Chattahoochee Hills has approximately 20 miles of river corridor within its boundary and 40,000 acres of land that it plans to develop according to sustainable design guidelines, saving at least 60 percent of the land as undeveloped green space. Economic values of the land will be maintained through use of state law allowing for transfer of development rights. The

four counties adjacent to the City of Chattahoochee Hills (Carroll, Coweta, Douglas and Fulton) have joined in an initiative proposing to protect an additional 25,000 acres of land and to implement a trail and greenway system that links the city to all four counties, connecting to villages, hamlets, and towns as well as private, state and county parks and sites.

The study authorized by H.R. 3785 would be conducted using the National Park Service's boundary adjustment criteria, which are similar to criteria used for special resource studies except that national significance does not need to be determined. A boundary study of this size would require the same type of public process used for special resource studies, and would cost an estimated \$250,000 to \$300,000.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.