

TESTIMONY OF DR. THOMAS C. O'KEEFE, AMERICAN WHITEWATER
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES SUBCOMMITTEE ON
NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS OF THE COMMITTEE
ON NATURAL RESOURCES
HEARING ON H.R. 1769: ALPINE LAKES WILDERNESS ADDITIONS AND
PRATT AND MIDDLE FORK SNOQUALMIE RIVERS PROTECTION ACT
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Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop, and members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands:

My name is Thomas O'Keefe, and I am here today in support of H.R. 1769, the Alpine Lakes Additions and Pratt and Middle Fork Snoqualmie Rivers Protection Act that will protect two of our nation's most spectacular wild rivers and add important low elevation forest lands to one of our nation's most popular and outstanding wilderness areas.

First I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today on behalf of this legislation. I would like to thank Congressman Reichert for initiating this effort through his leadership in developing the original vision for this legislative proposal in 2007. I would like to thank Senator Murray for her leadership in introducing a companion Senate bill and our co-sponsors from the rest of the delegation including in particular Congressman Inslee.

I have spent my entire life exploring rivers and have been to every region of the country and several places around the world where I have fished and hunted along beautiful mountain streams where I grew up in the northeast; kayaked remote gorges deep in the Rockies, Sierras, and Cascades; canoed the rivers of our Great Plains and the southeast, rafted rivers flowing through our deserts in the southwest; traveled along the rivers in Alaska where the opportunities for exploration are endless; and enjoyed good times with friends and family along the waterfronts of our nation's cities that grew up along rivers. Through these experiences I have spent time along several hundred rivers. My interest in rivers led me to a doctoral degree in aquatic ecology and for nearly a decade I coordinated a research program on rivers at the University of Washington where I also taught a course in Watershed Ecology and Management. For the past few years I have served as the Pacific Northwest Stewardship Director for American Whitewater. Founded in 1954, American Whitewater is a national membership organization that represents all whitewater enthusiasts, including kayakers, canoeists and river conservationists. Our mission is "to conserve and restore America's whitewater resources and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely." In addition I serve in a volunteer capacity on the Board of Cascade Land Conservancy, the Advisory Council for Mountains to Sound Greenway, and the Recreation Resources Division of The Mountaineers which I chair. These non-profit organizations are all active in stewardship in the valley.

1) The Middle Fork Snoqualmie and Pratt River Valleys

I am here today to tell you about a very special place—to me personally, to my family, and to our community—and that place is the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River and Pratt Rivers including their surrounding low elevation forests that are the subject of this legislation. The current Alpine Lakes Wilderness from which these rivers originate is the backyard wilderness for hundreds of thousands of Washingtonians who enjoy the recreational opportunities these lands provide and represent an enduring resource for all those who enjoy time spent in nature. The lands of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie, Pratt, and South Fork Snoqualmie River valleys represented in this proposal are readily accessible to a population of over three million people and attract visitors from across the nation. Few places in the country can boast such an incredible resource that is so accessible.

For my own family the Middle Fork Snoqualmie is a place where I have taught my son to hunt chanterelle mushrooms—golden treasures on the forest floor, a river where my son first learned to cast a fly rod in pursuit of native cutthroat trout, and a retreat from the city on warm summer evenings where we have camped on hidden gravel bars.

The river is also a natural laboratory and an important reference area for scientific research. I have been part of a research group that investigated the genetic composition and distribution of native cutthroat trout populations in tributary streams flowing through the lands proposed for protection in this proposal. The forests themselves are ecologically important because they provide significant low elevation (below 3000 feet) old-growth and mature forests that are snow free for much of the year. This biologically productive habitat in the valley bottoms and along the rivers supports greater species diversity than areas at higher elevation and provides important winter refugia when high country is in deep snow.

For our community the rivers and the valley bottom forests proposed for protection are a place to have fun. Over 60,000 vehicles enter the Middle Fork Snoqualmie valley every year and the public enjoys activities that include driving for pleasure, picnicking, fishing, whitewater kayaking, sight-seeing, photography, backpacking, climbing, rock hounding, car camping, day hiking, horseback riding, back country skiing, mountain biking, swimming, rafting, and hunting.

Having a place where these activities can be enjoyed is important to the quality of life of the region and provides a benefit to local employers who seek to attract a skilled work force. The accessibility of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie valley was a major factor in our family's decision to move to the region when my wife was recruited by the software industry.

The valley is also an important destination for solitude and a natural cathedral for spiritual rejuvenation. As I have sat on the balconies of Mt. Garfield above the Middle Fork valley I am reminded of a quote from the painter Thomas Cole's classic essay on American scenery: "...for those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a more deep toned emotion than aught which the

hand of man has touched. Amid them the consequent associations are of God the creator—they are his undefiled works, and the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things.”

For these and many other reasons the valley is a special place to many people.

2) A Celebration of Decades of Local Conservation Efforts

The proposal before us today is really a celebration of nearly two decades of community-driven effort to protect and enhance the ecological and recreation values of the valley. Once a popular recreation destination, the Middle Fork Snoqualmie declined in popularity in the 1980’s as the trail system disintegrated and campgrounds washed out and were closed.

Change began in the early 1990’s when activists called for more trails and recreation infrastructure, better management of public use, and restoration of damaged habitat along the Middle Fork Road. Volunteers spearheaded construction of a new Middle Fork footbridge in partnership with the Forest Service and the Forest Service soon extended the Middle Fork trail to the bridge. The loose network of volunteers that built the bridge started the Middle Fork Outdoor Recreation Coalition (MidFORC), an advocacy group that focuses on recreation and habitat issues in the valley.

Progress began in earnest in 1995 when the Mountains to Sound Greenway convened the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Study, an effort to build consensus around a future vision for the Middle Fork. Community groups joined agencies, landowners, and local residents to develop the “Public Use Concept,” a non-binding blueprint for future management of the valley. Soon after publication of the concept plan, implementation was underway.

The Forest Service completed an Access and Travel Management Plan for the valley, which focused road maintenance on the more heavily traveled lower section of the valley, expanded trail connectivity with a new footbridge across the river, and provided new opportunities for mountain biking in the valley. The Forest Service also built a new campground that has emerged as one of the more popular destinations in the National Forest, helping meet the demand for close-to-home family-oriented recreation. The National Park Service Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Program convened a group to plan river access sites a number of which have been built so that the public can now safely access the river while minimizing resource impacts.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund and other funding sources have allowed groups like Cascade Land Conservancy to facilitate land transactions that have brought key parcels along the river into public ownership. A more recent effort has focused on removing invasive weeds from the entire Middle Fork Valley with a combination of agency staff and a corps of dedicated volunteers coordinated by Mountains to Sound Greenway and other groups. While federal agencies have invested in these various efforts, I believe it is important to note that these investments have been leveraged many

times over through partnerships with organizations that have raised funds and coordinated volunteer efforts in the valley.

Designating key low elevation forest in the valley as wilderness and the river corridor as wild and scenic will recognize this community driven effort, and while the lines on the map before us in this legislation are important, the real protection for this place comes from the active involvement of individuals like myself and others who are out there organizing work parties, raising funds, and inspiring the members of our community to take care of this special place.

3) Engaging Local Stakeholders and Building Public Support

The process to develop a legislative proposal for long-term protection and stewardship of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie and Pratt Rivers and their surrounding low elevation forest, was one that included input from a diverse group of stakeholders. I wish to credit Congressman Reichert for his leadership in convening a robust consultation process as he developed the original legislation in 2007. As a recreational user in the valley I appreciate that we were included from the start of the process. As one example of an early issue that was addressed, the mountain biking community had a longstanding interest in being able to use the Middle Fork Trail. This trail and a setback to allow for future trail reroute were excluded from the wilderness proposal. The addition of Wild and Scenic River Protection for the Middle Fork Snoqualmie – which was championed by Senator Murray – protects the backcountry experience that the mountain bikers cherish while still allowing for their use. As a result, this bill has the enthusiastic support of the local and national mountain bike organizations. This is a great example of using more than one tool from those available to protect public lands.

Congressman Reichert also led the effort to consult early with the Summit at Snoqualmie Ski Area, Snoqualmie Tribe, the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, and the Washington State Department of Transportation. The Department of Natural Resources owns adjacent lands. The majority of these lands are managed to protect similar values as wilderness on federal lands. As such, this legislation is a complement to the work and investment of that agency and will create a contiguous stretch of protected lowland forest unrivalled in the Cascades. The state Department of Transportation (DOT) maintains road maintenance responsibilities on lands to the south of the proposal. The highway through this area (Interstate 90) is a critical shipping and transportation route and requires snow and avalanche work throughout the winter to remain open. The DOT was consulted on the proposed wilderness additions and is comfortable that the boundaries do not impact their ability to perform this important work. Beyond these critical stakeholders, the legislation under consideration enjoys broad-based community support. Ninety-six local elected officials, sixty-nine religious leaders, fifteen hunting and angling groups, fourteen recreation groups, twenty-four conservation groups, and 113 businesses in the Snoqualmie Valley are supporting the protection of wilderness and rivers covered in this legislation.

4) Additional Conservation Opportunities

While I support this legislation, there are two minor additions that should be made in this or future legislation. The first is extension of the wild and scenic corridor an additional 3.6 miles downstream to the west section line of section 16 (river mile 53.6). This would extend the wild and scenic corridor to the entrance to the valley corresponding to the boundary of public lands. This section of the river has been found suitable by the Forest Service for wild and scenic designation, and includes all the same values as the reach upstream. It is also the most popular section for whitewater recreation on the river. Over the past several years, public land managers and non-profits including Cascade Land Conservancy and Mountains to Sound Greenway have invested considerable resources into consolidating public ownership along the river. Public land managers including the Forest Service, King County, and Washington Department of Natural Resources have worked to cooperatively manage the corridor in a manner consistent with its high habitat and recreation values. Extending the wild and scenic corridor to include these additional 3.6 miles would insure uniform, unbroken designation, and simplify management for public land managers.

A second modification is the extension of wild classification downstream from the west section line of section 3 to the confluence with Dingford Creek, a distance of approximately 8.2 miles. When the original suitability determination was made by the Forest Service in 1990, the road extended further upstream. In the August 2003 Record of Decision for the Middle Fork Snoqualmie Access and Travel Management Plan, the Forest Service made the decision to close Road 56 at Dingford Creek to motorized public recreation access. With this decision, this section of river is worthy of wild classification.

Conclusion

In closing I want to again thank Congressman Reichert for his leadership in initiating this effort and reaching out to a broad group of stakeholders to support this legislation. Washingtonians are committed to Wilderness and preserving our State's natural heritage, and Congressman Reichert as well as Senator Murray deserve thanks for continuing this bipartisan tradition. The rivers and forests in this legislation have spectacular natural resource and community values and I urge the members of the Committee to support passage of H.R. 1769, the Alpine Lakes Additions and Pratt and Middle Fork Snoqualmie Rivers Protection Act.