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Testimony on behalf of the Taunton River Stewardship Council
Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands of the
House Committee on Natural Resources

Re: H.R. 415, to Amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to designate segments of the
Taunton River in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as a component of the National Wild
and Scenic Rivers System

October 30, 2007

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, on behalf of the Taunton River Stewardship Council, I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the outstanding resource values of the Taunton River in Massachusetts.

The Taunton River Stewardship Council is a partnership of ten cities and towns, located on the mainstem of the Taunton River, who, under the auspices of a congressionally authorized study bill, (signed into law in October of 2000), produced the Taunton River Stewardship Plan (2005) in support of the designation of the Taunton River as Wild and Scenic. In pursuit of this designation, municipally appointed citizen delegates to the Stewardship Council have been working together since 2001 with leading local, state, and national environmental, historical, and planning organizations to assess and document the outstanding resources of the Taunton River corridor. Whereas the original study bill included five municipalities and twenty-two river miles in the upper Taunton River watershed, the stewardship plan, completed in 2005, encompasses ten municipalities and includes the entire forty-mile mainstem of the Taunton River.

The Stewardship Plan was completed following over four years of study. With the help of almost three hundred people, from committee members, stream team members, students, and educators, to technical advisory volunteers from local, regional, state, and federal agencies and organizations, we feel that we have met our charge of finding out what is outstandingly remarkable about the Taunton River. The Taunton River Stewardship Council strongly supports passage of H.R. 415, to amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to designate the entirety of the Taunton River in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as a component of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

In its June 2007 Taunton Wild and Scenic Study Draft Report and Environmental Assessment, The National Park Service concluded that all forty miles of the Taunton River's mainstem are eligible for Wild and Scenic designation based on the river's free-flowing condition and the presence of "outstandingly remarkable" natural and cultural resource values. These values include fisheries, history and archaeology, ecology and biodiversity, and scenery and recreation. The eligible reach extends from the headwaters of the Taunton at the confluence of the Town and Matfield Rivers in Bridgewater, to the Mount Hope Bay at the U.S. 195 Bridge in Fall River. The Stewardship Council concurs with this opinion of eligibility and supports the designation of the entire mainstem as included in H.R. 415 (and the Preferred Alternative, B, identified in the Environmental Assessment).

The Stewardship Council has made a strong case for the ecology and biodiversity of the Taunton River corridor, which is supported by a recent study undertaken by The Nature Conservancy, in which the Taunton River watershed is characterized by a remarkable mix of 31 distinct wildlife

habitats and is ranked as globally significant. The Taunton River is also the longest free-flowing coastal river in New England, with a tidal influence reaching nearly 20 miles inland from Narragansett Bay. This extent of tidal influence maintains large, high quality, and globally rare brackish and freshwater tidal marshes. The Hockomock Swamp, which straddles six towns at the river's headwaters, is the largest freshwater wetland complex in southern New England, providing high quality habitat for numerous rare birds, reptiles, amphibians, and wetland plants. The Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NH&ESP) records indicate that three globally rare species of plants and two globally rare fish - bridle shiner and Atlantic sturgeon - inhabit the watershed. NH&ESP also recently confirmed the only known occurrence of the Eastern Spadefoot Toad, west of Cape Cod, adjacent to an urban area in the City of Taunton. The presence of river otter, eagles and even seals, in the upper reaches of the Taunton River, testify to its improving water quality and available habitat.

As the largest contributor of fresh water to Narragansett Bay, the Taunton River is critical to the various life stages of the fish and invertebrate population, including two species of river herring, winter flounder, American oyster, soft-shell clam, American eel, Quahog, and Atlantic sturgeon. The viability of the fishery is highly dependent upon the river system (including significant tributaries) and estuary, properly functioning as an intact, interdependent ecosystem. The river provides the largest spawning population of river herring in New England. The Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) and the local Lakeville – Middleboro Herring Commission have reported that fish from the Taunton are used in herring restoration projects region-wide, and have been shipped as far away as Michigan, to augment diminished runs. The Taunton watershed's nursery and foraging habitats support herring, rainbow smelt, silversides and other fish that play a critical role in supporting marine food webs. Striped bass and bluefish, which enter the river to feed on these species, are a significant recreational and commercial fishery. Both commercial and recreational fishing are important aspects of the region's economy, culture, and heritage.

The Stewardship Council has also worked with experts from the Public Archaeology Lab, Massachusetts Archaeological Society, Massachusetts Historical Commission, The Dighton Inter-tribal Council, Preservation Planners from the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, and local historical commissions and societies to study, assess, and document the outstanding cultural, historical, and archaeological resources of the Taunton River watershed. All of the information gathered and studied in conjunction with the above-mentioned parties indicates that there is an unusually high site density of archaeological findings, some dating back 12,000 years, all along the Taunton River mainstem and its tributaries. This may be one of the greatest concentrations of records of the presence of the Native Peoples in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The three subfields of archaeology - prehistoric, historic, and industrial -are also well represented along the Taunton and its tributaries. Remnants of colonial mills can be seen in some public parks such as Oliver's Mill in Middleboro, and the new Bridge Village Heritage Park in Berkley.

In 1976, the Taunton River was designated part of the Wampanoag Commemorative Canoe Passage by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The Wampanoag Commemorative Canoe Passage highlights the water route from the Massachusetts Bay to the Mount Hope Bay that was used by the Native Peoples. In 2002, the Taunton River was designated as the first Massachusetts Heritage River for its prominent role in the history, culture, recreation and economy of its corridor communities.

The agricultural resources of the Taunton River watershed were studied in conjunction with The United States Department of Agriculture's West Wareham Field Office staff. The Taunton River watershed supports a diverse agricultural base, with many of its over two hundred farms located within the Taunton River corridor. The variety of farm product, rich agricultural soils, field and edge habitat, and links to the culture, history, and heritage of the region make farmland retention a

priority within the watershed. The regional southeastern Massachusetts Vision 2020 project identified areas of successful agricultural and forestry industries as one of its six economic engines of distinctive character with historic ties to the region. Massachusetts' farms rank first nationally in value of average direct market sales, third nationally in farmland value per acre, and seventh nationally in total value of direct sales. A majority of these farms are classified as small farms, and over eighty percent are family owned. The proposed Wild and Scenic River corridor is also home to the Bristol County Agricultural High School, one of four agricultural high schools in the country (three of which are located in Massachusetts), and located on the banks of the Taunton River.

The Stewardship Council has also found the recreational opportunities afforded by the Taunton River to be diverse, outstanding, and in some cases, wholly unique. Working with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Public Access Board, the National Park Service's River and Trail Conservation Assistance Program, the Taunton Heritage River Program, and local parks and recreation committees and commissions, members of the Stewardship Council documented numerous river recreational and access sites, and the opportunity to develop or enhance several others. The river offers outstanding canoeing and kayaking over its relatively flat and meandering course from Bridgewater to Berkley, before the river widens as it approaches the Mount Hope Bay. The lower reaches of the river are characterized by sailing and motorized vessels, engaged in a number of leisure and recreational activities such as sport fishing or sailboat racing. Public boat ramps exist in several spots along the river including, Pleasant Street in Dighton, Brownell Street in Fall River, the Weir Waterfront Park in Taunton, and The Village Waterfront Park in Somerset. Public canoe access points exist at numerous locations along the mainstem of the Taunton River including two new sites, developed concurrently with the Wild & Scenic River study, at the Bridge Village Heritage Park in Berkley, and Town Landing in Bridgewater. Beaches such as Pierce's Beach in Somerset offer swimming opportunities on the lower Taunton River.

Along the shoreline, state and local parks offer scenic views and vistas, hiking and cultural activities. Some of these areas include Dighton Rock State Park in Berkley, Village Waterfront Park in Somerset, The Boyden Sanctuary in Taunton, The Bristol County Natural Center and trails located at the Bristol County Agricultural High School, the Camp Titicut Conservation Area in Bridgewater, and The Heritage State Park and Battleship Cove in Fall River.

Battleship Cove, home of the USS Massachusetts, presents a world class cultural, historical, and recreational opportunity, just above the terminus of the proposed Wild & Scenic River corridor. Since finding a home in Fall River in 1965, the USS Massachusetts has been the centerpiece of the world's largest exhibition of naval ships, is home to the Arleigh Burke National Destroyermen's Museum, and houses the official memorials to those citizens of the Commonwealth who gave their lives in World War II, the Persian Gulf, and those lost in 9/11. Not only has Battleship Cove been a cultural and economic asset to the Greater Fall River Area, it has also provided, in conjunction with the adjacent Fall River Heritage State Park complex, over a dozen educational, recreational, and historical research opportunities to the public, on an ongoing basis. Some of these programs include overnight camping on the battleship, youth and adult boating programs (including providing underprivileged children the chance to go to the waterfront), Seaside Cinema, Camp Cove, youth boat building, and many others.

The Heritage State Park is an eight and one-half acre park overlooking Battleship Cove on the Fall River waterfront. Established in 1984, the park provides boathouse facilities for the public sailing program, a three acre waterfront meadow that hosts fairs, concerts, festivals, and family picnics, an antique carousel, and a waterfront boardwalk and benches from which to enjoy the river. Although the Battleship Cove and Heritage State Park exist in the midst of a working waterfront and port area, they host hundreds of thousands of people annually, both from here and abroad. This is a recreational asset that can be found on no other recreational river segment that is currently included in the National Wild & Scenic River System. It is locally prominent, nationally significant, and, globally unique.

The urban/industrial landscapes that are visible in the proposed recreationally designated areas of the Taunton River have been characterized by certain critics as potentially devaluing the river's worth to the Federal Wild & Scenic River System. The Stewardship Council does not believe this to be the case at all. There are a number of urban revitalization plans underway within the Taunton River corridor. There is no better example than the Robertson Mill project, completed by the Weir Corporation (a community development corporation) in the Weir industrial section of Taunton, on the Taunton River. This mixed-use historic mill redevelopment project provided sixty-four affordable loft style apartments and 18,000 square feet of business space (and is the new home of Canoe Passage Outfitters, a major supplier of retail and rental canoes and kayaks and related gear in the Greater Taunton Area). The Robertson Mill opened in October of 2005 and was featured as an EPA Smart Growth Award winner at the 2005 National Brownfield Conference, and as a National Historic Preservation Award winner at the same conference in 2006. The Weir Corporation has also been the host of the annual Taunton River Festival for the past fourteen years. The Weir Corporation will begin another rehabilitation project on the former F.B. Rogers facility in 2008.

Projects like Robertson Mill, along with projects like the Town Landing, near downtown Bridgewater, and the Bridge Village Heritage Park in Berkley, are giving the river a "facelift" along its banks and once more inviting the public to rediscover the resource upon which the development of this region was based, and which in turn bore the burden of our growth as a state and a nation. The revitalization of these areas will also help to retain the intact riverfront that allows the Taunton to function as it does ecologically from its headwaters to the bay.

Designation of the Taunton River under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act will bring additional tools and opportunities to help highlight and conserve an extraordinary natural resource. The Stewardship Council is committed to working with partners and local communities to make the Wild and Scenic designation meaningful. Additionally, the communities of Fall River and Somerset – fulfilling their role as stewards – have served on the Study and Stewardship Committees and have formally requested designation of the entire river, recognizing designation as the best outcome from both an economic and environmental viewpoint.

The Stewardship Council requests that you act favorably on the environmentally preferred alternative (Preferred Alternative B) to add the Taunton River to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, to protect its "outstandingly remarkable" values for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. I would be pleased to provide the Committee with additional information on any of the Council's activities described here or elsewhere. You may contact Bill Napolitano at 508-824-1367 or bnap@srpedd.org, if you have any further questions.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this matter.

