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Testimony of Andy Stahl
Before the House Committee on Natural Resources
Regarding H.R. 2888 to Designate the Devil's Staircase Wilderness
Washington, D.C., October 1, 2009

My name is Andy Stahl. I am the Executive Director of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, a 10,000-member coalition of civil servants who manage our national forests and citizens who own them.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing on H.R. 2888, a bill to designate the Devil's Staircase Wilderness in Oregon and to protect segments of Wasson and Franklin Creeks therein as wild or recreation rivers. Thanks also to Representatives Blumenauer, Schrader and Wu for co-sponsoring this bill and to Senators Wyden and Merkley for introducing its companion, S. 1272, in the Senate.

On behalf of all Oregonians who care about our state's wildest place, I want to give special thanks to Representative DeFazio. Peter went above and beyond his legislative duty by trekking last fall to the rarely-visited Devil's Staircase waterfall in the heart of this eponymous wilderness. The eight-hour bushwhack through Oregon's steepest and most remote geography took our small group, led by two Forest Service scientists, through 300-year-old forests, thickets of native vine maple, evergreen huckleberry, and Devil's club, down precipitous bedrock debris slides, and, ultimately (with no small amount of luck) to the Devil's Staircase falls itself. It was an epic trip, as has been the journey of this land towards wilderness protection.

In 1983, Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield first brought legislative attention to Oregon's most wild place. At field hearings on H.R. 1149, which became the 1984 Oregon Wilderness Bill, Senator Hatfield heard testimony in support of Devil's Staircase (then called "Wassen Creek") from the Portland Audubon Society; the Wassen Creek Wilderness Committee; Siuslaw Task Force; from a hydrologic engineer who pointed out the landslides that result from clearcutting these steep slopes; and, from Marriner Orum representing the Sierra Club's Many Rivers Group (I can report that Marriner, at 92, is still riding his bicycle in Eugene).

By 1984, the Devil's Staircase area lay at the heart of a forest policy crisis over logging-related landslides in Oregon's Coast Range. Federal district court Judge Gus Solomon had ruled that "steep slopes make the Mapleton District [in which Devil's Staircase lies] particularly susceptible to soil erosion. It has the highest concentration of landslide-prone landtypes in the Siuslaw National Forest." Judge Solomon explained that "[a]s early as 1963, Forest Service personnel noticed that timber harvesting damaged soil, watersheds, and fish habitats in the district. Throughout the 1960's, soil specialists warned that logging and road construction could seriously affect soil and watershed stability. In 1969, the Regional Forester placed a moratorium

on timber harvesting in the part of the Mapleton District between the Smith and Umpqua Rivers,” which is the area proposed for protection in this bill. National Wildlife Federation v. United States Forest Service, 592 F. Supp. 931, 934 (D. Or. 1984).

In 1995, after a 10-year planning process, the Bureau of Land Management designated its portion of Devil’s Staircase as an “Area of Critical Environmental Concern,” which makes the forest “not available” for timber harvest.

<http://www.blm.gov/or/plans/wopr/exrmp/coosbay/tables/table3.html>. A subsequent land use planning process (the Western Oregon Plan Revision), although recently withdrawn by Secretary Salazar for unrelated legal infirmities, reaffirmed the area’s ACEC-protected status.

Concurrently, as a part of the Northwest Forest Plan, the U.S. Forest Service designated its lands contained within the proposed Devil’s Staircase wilderness as a late-successional forest reserve, thus withdrawing these lands from the commercial timberland base. The Devil’s Staircase area is also federally-protected critical habitat for two threatened bird species – the northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet.

Today, Devil’s Staircase remains as Oregon’s most wild, remote, and unexplored corner. Its deeply-canopied forest, some of whose trees are hundreds of years old, is the least fragmented in Oregon’s Coast Range. Its major streams, including Wasson, Franklin and Harvey Creeks are habitat for native salmon species, including coho, steelhead, Chinook, and cutthroat trout, while its upland habitat sustains Roosevelt elk, black bears, and Pacific giant salamanders. People visit Wasson Lake, a geologic oddity created by a recent landslide, to picnic and hike, and they explore, if sufficiently adventuresome, its remote and beautiful forested slopes.

But it is not for its recreational assets that Devil’s Staircase is most appreciated. This is a rugged and inaccessible landscape. No trail marks the way into these wild lands. Modern GPS technology is of little use in navigating its heavily-dissected ridges and ravines. In the words of the Wilderness Act, not only is Devil’s Staircase untrammelled by man, man himself is only an infrequent and wary visitor. H.R. 2888 would ensure that Devil’s Staircase remains Oregon’s wildest place forever.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.