

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL A. CALDWELL, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS CONCERNING S. 608, TO AMEND THE WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS ACT TO DIRECT THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO CONDUCT A STUDY OF THE DEERFIELD RIVER FOR POTENTIAL ADDITION TO THE NATIONAL WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS SYSTEM, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

June 21, 2023

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on S. 608, to amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to direct the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study of the Deerfield River for potential addition to the national wild and scenic rivers system, and for other purposes.

The Department supports S. 608. However, we would like to note that there are 22 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 Rivers System that have not yet been completed and transmitted to Congress.

S. 608 would authorize a study of the Deerfield River to determine whether it meets the criteria for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The study would encompass the entire river, including the North, South, East, and West Branches, and its major tributaries including the Green River, North River, South River, Clesson Brook, Chickley River, Cold River, Gulf Brook, Bog Brook, and Dunbar Brook. The bill requires the study to be completed no later than three years after the date on which funds are made available to carry out the study.

The Deerfield River is a highly significant recreational and natural resource that runs for 76 miles from southern Vermont through northwestern Massachusetts to the Connecticut River, traversing the Green Mountain National Forest, Berkshire Mountains, and Pioneer Valley hill towns. With rapids from Class II to Class V, it offers perhaps the best whitewater boating and rafting in Massachusetts. It is also an excellent cold-water trout fishery and provides outstanding habitat for native Brook Trout throughout the watershed. The historically significant Mohawk Trail ran along the river and was a principal Native American travel route. Several tributaries, such as Cold River and Bog and Gulf Brooks, are wild free-flowing rivers. Multiple segments of the Deerfield River were identified on the National Park Service's Nationwide Rivers Inventory as having "outstandingly remarkable" values and potentially eligible for National Wild and Scenic Rivers designation. The USDA Forest Service previously completed an eligibility evaluation under Section 5(d)(1) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and determined 13.2 miles of the Deerfield River (from its headwaters to north of Searsburg Reservoir) to be eligible, with a preliminary classification of "scenic."

There is also substantial existing hydroelectric development in the Deerfield basin, but the National Park Service would not expect the study to impact existing operation of these facilities.

The potential impact of the facilities on the eligibility and suitability of the various segments of the Deerfield River would be a topic for study consideration.

If enacted, the National Park Service intends to undertake the study in close cooperation with the affected communities, the Green Mountain National Forest, the relevant agencies of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and State of Vermont, and interest groups such as the Deerfield Watershed Association through a partnership-based study approach. The partnership-based approach is recognized in Section 10(e) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act as a means of encouraging state and local governmental participation in the administration of a component of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. This approach also allows for development of a proposed river management plan as part of the study, which helps landowners and local jurisdictions understand their potential future roles in river management should Congress decide to designate part, or all of the rivers being studied.

Although the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires the development of a comprehensive river management plan within three years of the date of designation, it has become the practice of the National Park Service to prepare this plan as part of a study of potential wild and scenic rivers when much of the river runs through private lands. This allows the National Park Service to consult widely with local landowners, federal and state land management agencies, local governments, river authorities, and other groups that have interests related to the river prior to determining if the river is suitable for designation. Early preparation of the plan also assures input from these entities as well as users of the river on the management strategies that would be needed to protect the river's resources.

The National Park Service is aware that there is substantial local community and stakeholder support for conducting a wild and scenic rivers study and, if enacted, we would expect strong public participation in the study process.

Chairman King, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.