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November 1st, 2021

Senator Catherine Cortez Masto, Chair
Public Lands, Forests, and Mining Subcommittee
304 Dirksen Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Mike Lee, Ranking Member
Public Lands, Forests, and Mining Subcommittee
304 Dirksen Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Public Lands, Forests, and Mining Subcommittee Legislative Hearing: S. 180, Buffalo Tract Protection Act; S. 1459, Protecting Unique and Beautiful Landscapes by Investing in California (PUBLIC) Lands Act; S. 1493, Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act; S. 1538, Smith River National Recreation Area Expansion Act; and S. 1589, Oregon Recreation Enhancement Act.

Dear Chair Cortez Masto and Ranking Member Lee:

On behalf of the whitewater paddling community, American Whitewater writes to express our appreciation for holding a hearing on S. 180, Buffalo Tract Protection Act; S. 1459, Protecting Unique and Beautiful Landscapes by Investing in California (PUBLIC) Lands Act; S. 1493, Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act; S. 1538, Smith River National Recreation Area Expansion Act; and S. 1589, Oregon Recreation Enhancement Act. These legislative proposals before the Committee would afford new protective designations for whitewater rivers that our members value and that protect the recreational paddling experience.

We are tremendously pleased by, and grateful for, the Committee's work to secure the passage of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act as well as the Great American Outdoors Act last Congress; we believe the Committee has an opportunity to build on the momentum of this success and work toward passage of similarly well developed legislation that protects and enhances opportunities for outdoor recreation that include whitewater paddling.

About American Whitewater

American Whitewater is a national non-profit 501(c)(3) river conservation organization founded in 1954 with approximately 50,000 supporters, 6,500 dues-paying members, and 100 local-based affiliate clubs, representing whitewater enthusiasts across the nation. American Whitewater's mission is to protect and restore America's whitewater rivers and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely. The organization is the primary advocate for the preservation and protection of whitewater rivers throughout the United States, and connects the interests of human-powered recreational river users with ecological and science-based data to achieve the goals within its mission. Our vision is that our nation's remaining wild and free-flowing rivers stay that way, our developed rivers are restored to function and flourish, that the public has access to rivers for recreation, and that river enthusiasts are active and effective river advocates. Our members live, work, and recreate in the watersheds that would be protected by S. 180, S. 1459, S. 1493, S. 1538, and S. 1589 that are before the Committee. Our specific comments on the individual bills follow.

Support for S. 180, Buffalo Tract Protection Act

American Whitewater and our constituents strongly support S. 180, *Buffalo Tract Protection Act*, introduced by Senator Heinrich and co-sponsored by Senator Lujan. The Buffalo Tract Protection Act would withdraw over 4,000 acres from gravel and sand mining near Placitas, New Mexico in the Rio Grande valley. River enthusiasts in New Mexico enjoy river floating opportunities on the Rio Grande between Placitas and Albuquerque. The river provides an accessible opportunity for families, beginners, and experienced paddlers to raft, kayak, and stand-up paddleboard. Additionally, there have been recent collaborative efforts to improve river access at the Hwy 550 bridge just a few miles to the West of the Buffalo Tract Protection Act lands. Withdrawing these lands from mining would help protect the health of the Rio Grande valley and watershed and support the continued enjoyment, lifestyle, and health benefits that the river provides to locals and visitors.

Support for S. 1459, Protecting Unique and Beautiful Landscapes by Investing in California (PUBLIC) Lands Act

American Whitewater strongly supports S. 1459, *Protecting Unique and Beautiful Landscapes by Investing in California (PUBLIC) Lands Act*, introduced by Senator Padilla and co-sponsored by Senator Feintsein. It includes three titles that would provide important protections for rivers enjoyed by the whitewater paddling community.

The Northwest California Wilderness, Recreation, and Working Forests Title of this legislation would designate 379 miles of new Wild and Scenic Rivers in Northwestern California's

Klamath Mountains and Coast Range. This region has some of the most spectacular wild rivers on the West Coast and the greatest concentration of Wild and Scenic Rivers in the nation, along with many more that qualify but are not yet designated. This title protects additional rivers and their watersheds while ensuring that much-needed fire and fuels management work is prioritized to help protect communities from wildfire. New Wild and Scenic designations include exceptional whitewater rivers such as the upper South Fork Trinity River, upper New River, East Fork North Fork and North Fork Trinity River, Canyon Creek, Middle Fork Eel River, and many others along with Redwood Creek, a spectacular overnight whitewater run that flows through the world's tallest living trees in Redwood National Park. This title of the bill would establish a 730,000 restoration area within the South Fork Trinity River, Mad River, and North Fork Eel watersheds for forest restoration and wildfire fuel reduction. In addition, 260,000 acres of proposed wilderness, largely in the Trinity River and Redwood Creek watersheds, would protect forests and rivers while allowing fire management, ecological restoration work, and continued use by Native American Tribes for traditional cultural and religious purposes.

The Central Coast Heritage Protection Title of this legislation would designate 159 miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers including 48.1 miles of the upper reaches of Piru Creek, a rare waterway that provides outstanding wilderness whitewater less than an hour drive from downtown Los Angeles. In addition, 20.9 miles of upper Sespe Creek would be designated. This Title would also designate nearly 250,000 acres of wilderness and create two new scenic areas in California's Los Padres National Forest and the Carrizo Plain National Monument.

The San Gabriel Mountains Foothills and Rivers Protection Title of this legislation would designate 45.5 miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers in Southern California including the San Gabriel River and its primary forks. This title will improve outdoor recreation opportunities by connecting park-poor areas to open space, benefitting many communities of color that do not currently have such access to the outdoors. This Title of the legislation expands the San Gabriel National Monument established in 2014 by an additional 109,143 acres and establishes a National Recreation Area along the San Gabriel River. This Title of the legislation would also protect more than 30,000 acres as wilderness.

Support for S. 1493, Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act

American Whitewater strongly supports S. 1493, *Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act*, introduced by Senator Tester. This legislation would designate portions of the North Fork of the Blackfoot River and Monture Creek watersheds as Wilderness, in the context of a collaboratively developed and carefully balanced compromise that benefits multiple uses of the National Forest. The proposed designations would protect the outstanding whitewater

paddling opportunities on both streams. The North Fork of the Blackfoot River in particular is recognized as one of Montana's premiere hike-in whitewater runs for kayakers and packrafters, featuring clear blue water, moderate rapids, and spectacular scenery. Trails up these river corridors are also primary routes used by our members to access the launching point for week-long float trips on the Wild and Scenic South Fork of the Flathead River to the north. Wilderness designation would ensure that the entire hiking or horsepacking experience into the South Fork Flathead watershed is managed in a consistent and exemplary manner. Lastly, these watersheds offer vital habitat for native fish, provide cold and clean water, and provide a scenic backdrop for the Blackfoot river downstream. American Whitewater has spent a decade exploring community support for Wild and Scenic River designations across Montana, and Monture Creek and the North Fork Blackfoot rivers have consistently been elevated for protection by a broad range of local citizens. These rivers, and their headwaters are beloved by our members and many river enthusiasts, and we support their protection with this legislation.

Support for S. 1538, Smith River National Recreation Area Expansion Act

American Whitewater strongly supports S. 1538, *Smith River National Recreation Area Expansion Act*, introduced by Senator Merkely and co-sponsored by Senators Wyden, Padilla, and Feinstein. The North Fork of the Smith River, originating in Oregon and flowing through California, is recognized as one of the nation's premiere and most pristine whitewater runs, featuring clear blue water, high quality rapids, and spectacular scenery. The watershed is characterized by rare geologic, hydrologic, and botanical resources that the legislation appropriately recognizes, as well as unique opportunities for backcountry recreation.

In 1990, Congress enacted legislation to establish the Smith River National Recreation Area (NRA) to protect the watershed, but the boundary of the NRA stopped at the Oregon border, leaving Oregon's portion of the North Fork of the Smith River and its tributaries unprotected. The proposed legislation would expand the Smith River National Recreation Area by 58,000 acres into Oregon to protect the diverse ecosystems of this watershed and provide consistent management for the recreational opportunities our members enjoy in this spectacular landscape. Additionally, the legislation would extend Wild and Scenic designation to the upper watershed of the North Fork of the Smith River and its major tributaries. This would further protect one of the West Coast's last free-flowing rivers and a special place for all who enjoy wild rivers.

The North Fork of the Smith River and its headwater tributaries are beloved by our members and many river enthusiasts, and we support their protection with this legislation. On behalf of the whitewater paddling community, thank you again for holding this hearing, and we look

forward to continuing to work with you in support of conservation and recreation values on our country's public lands and waters.

Support for S. 1589, Oregon Recreation Enhancement Act

American Whitewater strongly supports S. 1589, *Oregon Recreation Enhancement Act*, introduced by Senator Wyden and co-sponsored by Senator Merkley. This legislation would provide important protections for the lands along the Rogue Wild and Scenic River (designated 1968 as one of the original eight Wild and Scenic Rivers) and the Molalla Wild and Scenic River (designated 2019). The Rogue Wild and Scenic River is recognized as one of America's Great River Journeys and a classic multi-day river trip enjoyed that attracts visitors from around the world,¹ while the Molalla Wild and Scenic River is one of our nation's newest Wild and Scenic Rivers and a regional resource that is enjoyed as a day or weekend trip for residents and visitors of the greater Portland metropolitan area.

While the Rogue and Molalla Wild and Scenic Rivers are protected through the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the surrounding forested landscape through which these rivers flow provides the setting that makes a trip on either of these rivers such a special experience. The legislation would establish the Rogue Canyon (98,150 acres) and Molalla (29,884 acres) Recreation Areas to protect and enhance the nationally important recreation values; it would also establish a mineral withdrawal for these areas. The legislation would expand the Wild Rogue Wilderness Area by 59,512 acres to include old-growth forest along the Wild and Scenic Rogue River.

The legislation also includes a mineral withdrawal of federally managed public land in the headwaters of Hunter Creek and Pistol River as well as Rough and Ready and Baldface Creeks in the headwaters of the Illinois and Smith rivers in Oregon. All of these rivers are free-flowing from their headwaters to the Pacific Ocean and, in addition to their importance for wild salmon, they represent spectacular recreational resources for backcountry adventures in the Siskiyou Mountains region.

Conclusion

On behalf of the whitewater paddling community, thank you again for holding this hearing and the opportunity to provide testimony on these legislative proposals before the Committee. We strongly support S. 180, Buffalo Tract Protection Act; S. 1459, Protecting Unique and Beautiful Landscapes by Investing in California (PUBLIC) Lands Act; S. 1493,

¹ Palmer, T., 2018, *America's Great River Journeys*, Rizzoli, NY.

Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act; S. 1538, Smith River National Recreation Area Expansion Act; and S. 1589, Oregon Recreation Enhancement Act. We urge you to move these bills through the Committee and to the Senate floor to ensure these spectacular river resources are protected for future generations to experience and enjoy.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K. R. Colburn".

Kevin R. Colburn
National Stewardship Director

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "T. O'Keefe".

Thomas O'Keefe, PhD
Pacific Northwest Stewardship Director