

STATEMENT TO THE SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND FORESTS

ON

THE ALPINE LAKES WILDERNESS ADDITIONS AND PRATT AND MIDDLE  
FORK SNOQUALMIE RIVERS PROTECTION ACT OF 2009 (S. 721, H.R. 1769)

BY

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THE MOUNTAINEERS  
THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY  
WASHINGTON TRAILS ASSOCIATION  
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Thank you Chairman Wyden, and Members of the Subcommittee for providing the Alpine Lakes Working Group with the opportunity to submit this statement in support of S. 721, the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Additions and Pratt and Middle Fork Snoqualmie Rivers Protection Act of 2009<sup>1</sup>. The lands and waters proposed for protection under the current legislation are critical additions that provide important fish and wildlife habitat and world-class land and water-based recreation opportunities within an hour's drive from over a million people in the Seattle-Bellevue Metropolitan area.

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<sup>1</sup>The Alpine Lakes Working Group includes the following organizations: Alpine Lakes Protection Society, American Rivers, American Whitewater, Campaign for America's Wilderness, Friends of Wild Sky, MidFORC Coalition, North Cascades Conservation Council, Sierra Club - Cascade Chapter, The Mountaineers, The Wilderness Society, Washington Trails Association, Washington Wilderness Coalition.

We would also like to sincerely thank Senator Murray and Representative Reichert for introducing this important legislation and the other members of the Washington delegation who have cosponsored the bills: Senator Cantwell and Representatives Baird, Inslee, McDermott, and Smith. In particular, we applaud Representative Reichert's initiative to protect wilderness-quality lands and the Pratt River in his district and to Senator Murray for adding protections for portions of the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River to the overall proposal.

#### RICH CONSERVATION HISTORY OF THE ALPINE LAKES REGION

This bill compliments the rich conservation history in an area very near and dear to the hearts of Washingtonians – the Alpine Lakes region. With its wide variety of largely untouched land forms, lakes, and ecosystems that embodies all the characteristics described in the Wilderness Act, the Alpine Lakes region has been the focus of conservation efforts on the part of the United States Congress, the Forest Service, state and municipal governments and local citizens for more than 60 years. From early regional administrative protections by the Forest Service to a 1976 Wilderness designation that utilized special processes to maximize protections, the area has received national attention. Over the past 30 years, the Forest Service acquired much private land in the Alpine Lakes region, particularly in the Pratt River valley and along the shorelines of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River.

The Middle Fork Snoqualmie valley region has also received significant attention from government agencies including the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and King County. The DNR was a leader in protecting the Middle Fork Snoqualmie area when it established the Mt. Si Conservation Area in the late 1970's and then pursued several land

exchanges west of the national forest boundary. This month DNR formally announced plans for a Middle Fork Snoqualmie Natural Resource Conservation Area (NRCA), which will include those lands south of the river that are contiguous with this proposed wilderness creating a large contiguous area of joint agency-protected-habitat that is unique on the west slope of the Cascades. King County has also assisted in further conservation work in the area by purchasing key parcels along the Middle Fork Snoqualmie Valley bottom which are managed as the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Natural Area.

This proposal represents 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. The Middle Fork Outdoor Recreation Coalition (MidFORC), supported by the Mountains to Sound Greenway, has worked for nearly two decades to improve trails and recreation infrastructure, provide better law enforcement, and restore damaged habitat in the Middle Fork Snoqualmie valley.

## OUTSTANDING WILDERNESS AND WILD AND SCENIC VALUES

### **Low elevation habitat**

The proposed additions in the Pratt, Middle Fork and South Fork Snoqualmie Valleys provide an opportunity to protect rare low-elevation old-growth and mature forests - less than 900 feet in elevation at the mouth of the Pratt Valley. Statewide, of the roughly 2.7 million acres of designated wilderness on national forest land, just 6 percent includes low elevation lands (below

3,000 feet). In contrast, low elevation lands comprise a full 50 percent of this 22,100-acre proposal. Such biologically-rich lowlands are largely absent from the current Alpine Lakes Wilderness. Low elevation lands are snow-free for much of the year and are more biologically productive, supporting many more species than higher elevation habitats. The lands to be protected provide critical winter and spring habitat for wildlife when high country is deep in snow.

### **Clean Water and Flood Control**

The Pratt, Middle Fork and South Fork Snoqualmie watersheds are sources of clean water, important for downstream fisheries and commercial and residential water users. Preserving the forests as wilderness would ensure maintenance of flow during the dry summer months, and aid in flood control.

The Snoqualmie River basin is subject to flood events on a regular basis. Many areas are in the ‘rain on snow’ zone which means that rain falls on snow regularly throughout the winter months. This rainfall pattern is associated with landslides, downstream flooding, and stream bank damage. Evidence shows that forested areas are better able to capture rain that has fallen during the rain on snow events, making them critical for controlling runoff rates. The proposed additions would preserve intact forest ecosystems, protecting against increasing flood severity on downstream infrastructure and residents.

### **Close to a Large Human Population**

The Alpine Lakes Wilderness is one of the most-visited wilderness areas in the United States. Due to its proximity to the Seattle metropolitan area, it provides quick access to wilderness experiences to tens of thousands of people. This opportunity is fundamental to the quality of life for Washingtonians and the ability to gain inspiration and renewal from these lands. The proposed additions would increase the amount of wilderness available for these experiences that are cherished by so many.

### **Fish and Wildlife**

These wild mountain valleys boast abundant native populations of trout, deer, and elk. Cougars, bears and bobcats are present, and at least one grizzly bear has been sighted in the Pratt valley. Salmon are not present due to the presence of Snoqualmie Falls; however, the Pratt and Middle Fork Snoqualmie rivers are home to healthy resident trout populations. Substantial areas of old growth forest are present in the area, supporting the full complement of native species. The balance of the forest is 70-80 year old second growth with many trees that are 3 feet in diameter and 150 feet tall.

### **Recreation**

The Middle Fork and South Fork Snoqualmie valleys are some of the closest and most accessible mountain valleys to residents of the greater Seattle-Bellevue Metropolitan area. The proposed additions have been carefully crafted to preserve existing recreational opportunities for hiking, camping, rafting, kayaking, horseback riding, mountain biking and wildlife viewing. It also protects a large area of accessible lowland forests, preserving hunting and fishing opportunities in primitive settings.

## **Wild and Scenic River Values**

Few rivers anywhere in the country can match the quality of recreational, scenic and ecological resources that the Middle Fork Snoqualmie and its major tributary the Pratt provide. Whether it's a quiet fishing trip after work, a day out with friends on some of the most outstanding whitewater the region has to offer, or a weekend with the family in one of the most scenic river valleys in the country, these rivers are tremendous resources for our community. They are also an important source for clean water that sustains the culturally and biologically significant fishery resources of the Snoqualmie River system. Protecting the outstanding ecological and recreational value of these river corridors not only complements the protection of the amazing wilderness values, but also provides important ecological and recreational connectivity.

The designation will ensure that 27 miles of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River and 9.5 miles of the Pratt River are protected for future generations securing this important habitat, protecting the quality of the recreational experience, and recognizing the community-based stewardship efforts that maintain the river corridor as one of our community's greatest natural assets.

In their testimony on the bill, the Forest Service raised some minor issues and asked "to work with the subcommittee to address some technical aspects of the bill." Here we address those concerns.

The Forest Service suggests a modification of the proposed wilderness boundary to allow for trail reconstruction or relocation of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Trail #1003. This trail is

popular amongst mountain bicyclists and the Forest Service is concerned about allowances for work in response to potential future events such as flooding or landslides. This issue has already been addressed by legislation to the satisfaction of our working group and the mountain bike community, who has endorsed the legislation. In October 2007, an evaluation of the proposal boundary was made using the latest digital definition of the trail location based upon recent Forest Service field work. This definition included not only the actual location of the trail (as defined by GPS equipment) but the definition was also adjusted for potential trail relocations so as to account for river channel movement, landslides, or other events that could require trail relocation further away from the river. The boundary was then placed on the opposite side of the trail from the river, using a set back of no less than 80 vertical feet from the digital trail definition noted above. This proposal boundary placement ensures that the actual trail location or its potential relocation will always lie outside of the proposed wilderness boundary. The proposal boundary was placed to ensure existing mountain bike usage will not be impacted by this proposal. The new trail alignment and the noted set backs were provided to the Forest Service and it is our understanding that they are incorporated in the Section.2.(a) map accompanying the legislation.

The Forest Service suggests redrawing the wilderness boundary to exclude approximately three miles of the Pratt River Trail #1035 because the trail is scheduled for major reconstruction beginning this fiscal year. The Forest Service also claims that the adjustment would reduce operation and maintenance costs along this segment of the trail, due to the ability to use motorized equipment for trail maintenance. While the Pratt River Trail (#1035) referenced in the testimony is a system trail, the segment referenced has not been maintained by the Forest Service

for many decades. To say that it currently receives high use is inaccurate and misrepresents the situation on the ground. The noted segment does receive some use for the first mile or so before the route becomes so difficult to find that it cannot be followed. However, the use levels for this segment are well below what most would consider high use (i.e., Barclay Lake) even with the proximity of the campground across the river.

Additionally, this trail is not planned for mountain bike use and therefore this area's designation is fully consistent with a wilderness designation. The Alpine Lakes Working Group (ALWG) does not support excluding a trail from wilderness designation because of anticipated trail construction. Trail use, construction and maintenance are allowed under the Wilderness Act and such activities are performed on a daily basis within the National Forest System. There are a number of examples here within the Mt. Baker Snoqualmie National Forest of trail construction of this scope within designated wilderness:

- **Kelley Creek Trail Reroute**, Skykomish Ranger District, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie NF (Trail 1076) - The Forest Serviced approved this project on April 9, 2008 with the recognition that the Wild Sky Wilderness was likely to become law. A new trail would be constructed within the wilderness and would connect to an existing trail. The new trail would begin at the heavily-used Iron Goat Trailhead, which has parking and amenities similar to those at the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River Trailhead (gateway bridge). The trail project would include approximately two miles of new trail in wilderness in an area that has never had a trail before.. No mechanized or motorized equipment is proposed or authorized.
- **Suiattle Creek Trail reroute**, Darrington Ranger District, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie NF (Trail 2000) - This trail reroute and reconstruction is proposed to deal with flood damage that eliminated a major trail bridge across the Suiattle River and caused other extensive trail damage. To locate a bridge on a better site less prone to flood damage, the project includes building a new trail segment. The entire project would occur within the existing Glacier Peak Wilderness. The trail project would include 3 miles of new trail open to hikers and packstock. Certain mechanized or motorized equipment is proposed to be used.



The Forest Service testimony states that the exclusion of three miles of the Pratt River Trail (#1035) would not significantly alter the proposal. The ALWG finds that such exclusion would eliminate low elevation areas from the proposal that are critical to the integrity of the lower Pratt River Valley and the proposal.

Finally, the Forest Service recommends adjusting the boundary to exclude two segments totaling 300 acres of Washington State Department of Natural Resource (DNR) lands in the northwestern boundary of the proposal. These two DNR parcels were included within the wilderness boundary so that if they were to be acquired by the Forest Service after passage of the legislation they would be added to the wilderness without requiring an additional act of Congress. Nothing in the bill obligates or encourages the Forest Service or DNR to pursue an acquisition or exchange. The parcels were included to establish a manageable boundary based on ecological or watershed features that can be located on the ground. Currently, Thompson Lake is literally split between the two management agencies. The Mt Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Boundary is located two to three miles west of Thompson Lake and Russian Butte. Consequently, the Forest Service has acquisition authority for the DNR parcels included in the proposal. As a result of the Huckleberry Land Exchange of 1996-2001, the Forest Service actually acquired a number of isolated parcels that are west of the noted DNR parcels near Russian Butte and Thompson Lake.

#### BROAD-BASED OUTREACH AND SUPPORT

The legislation under consideration enjoys broad-based community support, including 104 local elected officials, 69 religious leaders, 15 hunting and angling groups, 14 recreation groups, 24 conservation groups, and 113 local businesses, including 100 from the the Snoqualmie Valley –

closest to the proposal. Through the outreach efforts led by Representative Reichert and Senator Murray, several specific concerns and issues were addressed early on in the process.

Of importance is the work with the local mountain biking group, the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance, to make sure that the current every-other-day access to the Middle Fork trail is maintained. The wilderness boundary, as proposed, is drawn to exclude the trail (since mountain biking is not allowed in wilderness) and the Wild and Scenic designation along the same stretch compliments this with protections for the fish, wildlife, and recreational values that also allow for continued mountain bike use. As a result of their early involvement, Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance and the International Mountain Bike Association (IMBA) are strong supporters of this bill and see it as a model for protecting the wildlands values of quality mountain bike areas.

Additionally, outreach was made to state agencies with adjacent lands and responsibilities. As mentioned previously, the state 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 complements the work and investment of that agency. Taken together, the combination of Federal Wilderness and Washington State DNR Natural Resource Conservation Area in the Pratt and Middle Fork Snoqualmie valleys will create a large extent of protected lowland acreage unrivalled in the Cascades. The state Department of Transportation (DOT) has 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.

#### ADDITIONAL CONSERVATION OPPORTUNITIES

We suggest three minor changes 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 of the valley corresponding to the edge of solid public ownership. 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.

The second suggested change is the extension of the 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, Road 56 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. As a result of this decision, and the ecological values of the river, we believe that this section of river should be classified as wild.

The third recommendation is a request to make a minor boundary adjustment to the wilderness boundary along the western edge of the proposal in the northeast corner of Section 12, (Township 23N, Range 9E). There is a small (less than a quarter section; ca. 150 acres) piece of Forest Service land known as “Russian Butte.” We have reexamined this part of the proposal boundary and have determined that these 160 acres would make a logical and appropriate addition to the proposal. These lands are located entirely within the Gifford Creek drainage. The parcel is classified in the Mt Baker-Snoqualmie Land Management plan as ‘late successional reserve,’ the same as the adjacent Pratt River drainage. This land is surrounded on 1 side by the proposed wilderness area and on the remaining three sides by DNR lands. These DNR lands have a high likelihood of becoming a state Natural Resource Conservation Area. Failing to add this small quarter section could result in an isolated patch of national forest surrounded by lands managed for wilderness values. As such, it is entirely logical to adjust the proposed wilderness boundary to include this parcel.

In closing, the proposed legislation represents a magnificent investment in the quality of life of all Washingtonians and Americans and we are pleased to offer it our very strongest support. We celebrate in joining the broad-based voices of the conservation, recreation, business, religious, and list of elected officials that urge passage of these protections. We hope that the Committee will move favorably and quickly on this important legislation. Thank you.