

Statement for the Record

Bureau of Land Management U.S. Department of the Interior

House Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands H.R. 980, Southwestern Oregon Watershed and Salmon Protection Act November 9, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a statement for the record on H.R. 980, the Southwestern Oregon Watershed and Salmon Protection Act. The bill would withdraw 5,215 acres of public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and 95,806 acres of National Forest System lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service) from operation of the public land, mining, and mineral and geothermal leasing laws.

The lands to be withdrawn include the Hunter Creek and North Fork Pistol River headwaters and the Rough and Ready Creek and Baldface Creek watersheds. The lands also border or are near the Kalmiopsis Wilderness. The Department understands that the purpose of the withdrawal is to protect important habitat of threatened and endangered aquatic and botanical resources. The Department supports H.R. 980.

Background

In southwestern Oregon, the BLM manages approximately 1.2 million acres of public lands through the Coos Bay and Medford District Offices. The BLM works closely with the State of Oregon, Tribal governments, counties, and cities, as well as local communities to ensure the sustainable management of these lands and their multiple uses. The lands provide a wide variety of uses, ranging from timber production to recreational opportunities and critical wildlife habitat. A high number of threatened, endangered, and sensitive aquatic and botanical species are known to occur throughout the area. Mining has been identified as a primary threat to a number of these botanical species and could pose harm to the threatened salmon species within these waters.

Withdrawal Area

The lands proposed for withdrawal under H.R. 980 are generally known as the Klamath Mountains, and their defining characteristic is the North Fork of the Smith River, which originates in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness and drains most of the area under consideration for withdrawal. Once it crosses the Oregon-California state line, the Smith River is the largest free-flowing river system in California. Creeks that feed into the North Fork and other rivers that flow to the Oregon Coast offer unique ecological features stemming from the confluence of the Coast Range, Cascades, and Siskiyou Mountains. A high concentration of rare plants, forested trails, and scenic views are all emblematic of these drainages. Rough and Ready Creek and Baldface Creek are listed as eligible for National Wild and Scenic River designation by the Forest Service.

Administrative Withdrawal

On December 30, 2016, these lands were administratively withdrawn for 20 years by Public Land Order 7859 for the purpose of protecting the lands while Congress considered a permanent legislative

withdrawal. The current administrative withdrawal protects all valid existing rights, including those under the mining and mineral leasing laws. Existing mining claims may be developed if a mineral validity examination shows that a discovery of a valuable mineral deposit existed at the time of the withdrawal. Currently, there are 279 existing claims in the withdrawal areas, of which 234 are lode claims and 45 are placer claims.

H.R. 980

H.R. 980 would permanently withdraw 5,215 acres of BLM-managed public lands in the Coos Bay and Medford Districts and 95,806 acres of Forest Service lands in the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest from operation of the public land, mining, and mineral and geothermal leasing laws. The proposed withdrawal encompasses two areas near or bordering the Kalmiopsis Wilderness. These include the Hunter Creek and North Fork Pistol River headwaters and the Rough and Ready Creek and Baldface Creek watersheds.

The Department supports H.R. 980, which would ensure the protection of both the lands and resources within the area covered by the bill. The necessity of this protection is exemplified by the fact that within the lands proposed for withdrawal by H.R. 980, the BLM's 2016 Northwestern and Coastal Resource Management Plan and Southwestern Oregon Resource Management Plan identified five Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs): Hunter Creek Bog, North Fork Hunter Creek, West Fork Illinois River, Rough and Ready, and Woodcock Bog. The two Resource Management Plans also recommended the withdrawal of these five ACECs.

Additionally, included within the boundary of the withdrawal are approximately 1,680 acres of non-Federal land that are not currently affected by segregation or withdrawal. If these non-Federal acres enter into Federal ownership in the future, they would become subject to the terms and conditions of the withdrawal.

Finally, like the current administrative withdrawal, the permanent withdrawal proposed under H.R. 980 would not prohibit mining operations under existing notices or plans. Any preexisting exploration or mining operations would continue, but new mining claims would be prohibited. H.R. 980 also would not restrict existing recreational uses or forest management activities.

Conclusion

The BLM recognizes the importance of locally crafted recreation and conservation areas on public lands and waters. The BLM believes the most effective and enduring conservation strategies are those reflecting the priorities, needs, and perspectives of the families and communities that know, live, work, and care for the lands and waters. The BLM supports protecting these treasured lands for present and future generations.