

**Statement of  
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**House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, & Public Lands**

**H.R. 2250, Northwest California Wilderness, Recreation, and Working Forests Act  
July 10, 2019**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 2250, the Northwest California Wilderness, Recreation, and Working Forests Act, which provides direction for the future management of Federal lands in Del Norte, Humboldt, Mendocino, Tehama, Siskiyou, and Trinity counties, California and Josephine County, Oregon. H.R. 2250 establishes the South Fork Trinity-Mad River Restoration Area, creates or expands 17 wilderness areas, designates seven new potential wilderness areas, and designates new wild, scenic, and recreational rivers on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Park Service (NPS), and U.S. Forest Service (USFS). Of the approximately 313,000 acres of new wilderness proposed by the bill, approximately 246,000 acres are on FS-managed lands, approximately 36,000 on BLM-managed public lands, and 31,000 on NPS-managed lands.

The bill also designates the Horse Mountain Special Management Area and Sanhedrin Conservation Management Area on lands managed by the USFS and authorizes the designation or study of three new recreation trails on lands primarily managed by the USFS, with a small portion of one of the trails traversing BLM-managed public lands. Finally, the bill includes language to facilitate the restoration of the Redwood National and State Parks, to authorize the Northwest California Public Lands Remediation Partnership, and to establish two visitor centers.

The Department of the Interior (Department) has pledged to expand access to America's public lands, increase hunting, fishing, and recreational opportunities nationwide, enhance conservation stewardship, and reduce wildfire risk through Secretarial Orders 3347, 3356, 3366, and 3372. To advance these goals, we are focused on restoring full collaboration and coordination with local communities and making the Department a better neighbor.

As a matter of policy, the Department supports Congressional action to resolve issues of wilderness designation and release of wilderness study areas (WSAs) on public lands across the West, and welcomes opportunities to further those efforts. However, we also want to ensure that designating new wilderness areas on public lands outside of existing WSAs is the most appropriate land management tool, and that such designations would not unnecessarily impede public access or limit outdoor recreational opportunities. The Department would like the opportunity to work with the sponsors and the Subcommittee to address a number of issues and technical concerns outlined in this statement.

In this testimony, we address proposed designations on lands administered by the BLM and the NPS. We defer to the Department of Agriculture regarding the designations on the lands and interests administered by the USFS.

## **H.R. 2250, Northwest California Wilderness, Recreation, and Working Forests Act**

### ***Restoration and Economic Development (Title I)***

Title I of H.R. 2250 creates the approximately 730,000-acre South Fork Trinity-Mad River Restoration Area for the purpose of establishing, restoring, and maintaining fire-resilient forest structures, reducing wildfire risk, protecting and restoring aquatic habitat and fisheries, and protecting the quality of water resources. The vast majority of the lands within this proposed area are managed by the Forest Service.

Title I also authorizes the formation of a Northwest California Public Lands Remediation Partnership among multiple entities to remediate impacts from illegal marijuana cultivation on public lands. The Department notes that illegal marijuana cultivation is one of the major law enforcement issues on public lands in this area of California. The remoteness and relative inaccessibility of public lands in the state makes them ripe for drug trafficking organizations and private individuals to seek profit from illegal marijuana cultivation.

The BLM currently partners with Federal, state, tribal, county, and local partners to support a number of anti-marijuana cultivation initiatives and task forces, including the White House Office of National Drug Policy High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Initiatives, the California Department of Justice Campaign Against Marijuana Planting Task Force, and the North State Major Investigative Team. The Department supports efforts to further combat the deleterious effects of illegal marijuana cultivation on public lands.

Title I authorizes initiatives to restore degraded redwood forest ecosystems in Redwood National and State Parks. The Department recognizes the need to rehabilitate degraded landscapes in Redwood National and State Parks and notes that the NPS is currently engaged with state and nonprofit partners, through existing authorities, in a planning effort to implement forest restoration treatments on approximately 39,500 acres in the parks.

Title I authorizes the establishment of a visitor center in Del Norte County, California, to assist in fulfilling the purposes of Redwood National and State Parks and the Smith River National Recreation Area. Currently, the NPS cooperates with state and nonprofit partners to operate existing visitor facilities in the county. The Department recognizes the value of establishing a new visitor center, in cooperation with public and private partners, provided that it can be done while the NPS focuses resources on reducing its \$11.9 billion deferred maintenance backlog and addressing other critical park needs.

Title I authorizes a study to evaluate the feasibility and suitability of establishing overnight accommodations on Federal land at the southern and northern boundaries of Redwood National and State Parks, or on land within 20 miles of the boundaries. If found to be suitable and feasible, the bill further authorizes the establishment of agreements with private and nonprofit organizations for the development, operation, and maintenance of overnight accommodations.

The Department recommends that the study be completed before Congress decides whether to authorize new partnerships for the purpose of offering overnight accommodations at Redwood National and State Parks.

***Recreation (Title II)***

Among other provisions affecting the USFS, Title II of H.R. 2250 authorizes a study for the Bigfoot National Recreation Trail. The proposed trail route is primarily on USFS-managed lands, with less than three miles crossing BLM-managed public lands. The Department concurs that the USFS should be the lead agency in assessing the feasibility of the trail and ultimately administering it.

Title II authorizes the establishment of agreements with qualified private and nonprofit organizations to undertake trail and campground maintenance, public education, visitor contacts, outreach, and visitor center staffing on Federal lands in Mendocino, Humboldt, Trinity, and Del Norte counties in California. The Secretary currently exercises existing authorities to work with private and nonprofit entities for these functions. We would appreciate the opportunity to work the Subcommittee to refine this section to ensure it does not conflict or overlap with existing law.

***Conservation (Title III)***

Title III of H.R. 2250 creates or expands 17 wilderness areas and creates seven potential wilderness areas on over 313,000 acres of Federal land in northwestern California. These designations are on lands managed primarily by the USFS (approximately 246,000 acres), BLM (approximately 36,000 acres), and the NPS (approximately 31,000 acres). Title III also designates 379 miles of new wild, scenic, and recreational rivers on lands managed by the BLM, NPS, and the USFS, and establishes the approximately 14,200-acre Sanhedrin Conservation Management Area on lands managed by the USFS.

The Department notes that the BLM-managed public lands proposed for wilderness designation by H.R. 2250 generally serve as habitat for a diversity of plant and animal life and provide important opportunities for hiking, hunting, rock climbing, horseback riding, and other forms of outdoor recreation in northwestern California.

We would like the opportunity to work with the sponsor and the Subcommittee to ensure that wilderness designation on lands outside of existing WSAs is the best mechanism for protecting these resources while restoring balance to other important uses. The Department believes that alternative management approaches could conserve sensitive resources while still accommodating the full range of uses and activities permitted on other BLM-managed public lands.

In addition, the Department notes that some of the areas proposed for wilderness designation may present management challenges because of their small size, isolated nature, or lack of adequate public access. Moreover, the BLM determined as part of the land use inventory and planning process that several of the proposed areas do not possess wilderness characteristics. If Congress opts to proceed with designation of these lands as wilderness, we would like to work on boundary modifications to enhance manageability, and technical corrections to aid

implementation, including updated acreage descriptions and language to improve naming consistency.

The Department also requests that language be added to the bill ensuring that portions of underlying WSAs not otherwise designated as wilderness by the bill be released for other multiple uses. In addition, there are a few other small BLM-managed WSAs within the counties affected by the bill. We recommend that the sponsor consider resolving the status of these areas as well.

Title III would also designate approximately 379 miles of new Wild and Scenic Rivers under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Over 35 creeks and rivers are impacted by the bill, including 20 crossing BLM-managed public lands and three crossing NPS-managed public lands. If Congress opts to add these segments to the National Wild and Scenic River System, the Department would like to work with the sponsor on technical changes, including changes to classification of certain river segments to enhance manageability. The Department also would like to work on boundary adjustment to avoid designations that predominantly cross through private lands.

Finally, Title III designates approximately 31,000 acres of Redwood National Park as potential wilderness and directs the potential wilderness area to be managed as wilderness. The bill further requires a report to Congress every three years on the status of ecological restoration within the potential wilderness area and the area's progress toward eventual wilderness designation. Although the bill provides an exception for ecological restoration activities in the potential wilderness area, the Department does not support the designation of potential wilderness while its work to rehabilitate forested watersheds throughout Redwood National and State Parks is in progress.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 2250, the Northwest California Wilderness, Recreation and Working Forests Act. The Department appreciates the sponsor's effort to address difficult resource and land management issues in northwestern California and looks forward to continuing to work with the sponsor and the Subcommittee as this bill moves through the legislative process.