

**House Natural Resources Committee  
Federal Lands Subcommittee  
December 7, 2017**

Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Hanabusa, Congressman Soto and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about House Resolution 3961; to amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to designate segments of the Kissimmee River and its tributaries in the State of Florida for study for potential addition to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

My name is Garrett Wallace. I am the Government Relations Manager of the Florida Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. Prior to my current position at The Nature Conservancy, I was the Director of Federal Affairs for the South Florida Water Management District overseeing Federal interactions regarding ecosystem restoration including America's Everglades and the restoration of the Kissimmee River.

The Nature Conservancy is an international, nonprofit conservation organization working around the world to protect ecologically important lands and waters for people and nature. We have hundreds of expert staff working all over the United States on related issues to bring science and community engagement together. Our mission is to conserve the lands and waters upon which all life depends.

The Kissimmee River once meandered for 103 miles through central Florida. Its floodplain, reaching up to 3 miles wide, was inundated for long periods by heavy seasonal rains. Native wetland plants, wading birds and fish thrived there, but prolonged flooding in 1947 prompted a public outcry for federal assistance to reduce flood damage to property. In 1948, the U.S. Congress authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct the Central and South Florida Project, which led to engineering changes to deepen, straighten and widen the waterway.

In the 1960s, the Kissimmee River was channelized by cutting and dredging a 30-foot-deep straightaway known as the C-38 canal. Before channelization was complete, biologists suspected the project would have devastating ecological consequences. While the project delivered on the promise of flood protection, it also destroyed much of a floodplain-dependent ecosystem that nurtured threatened and endangered species, as well as hundreds of other native fish and wetland-dependent animals. More than 90 percent of the waterfowl that once graced the wetlands disappeared and the number of bald eagle nesting territories decreased by 70 percent. After the waterway was transformed into a straight, deep canal, it became oxygen-depleted and the fish community it supported changed dramatically.

After extensive planning, construction for the Kissimmee River Restoration Project began in 1999 with backfilling 8 miles of the C-38 canal. Three construction phases are now complete, and continuous water flow has been re-established to 24 miles of the meandering Kissimmee River. Seasonal rains and flows now inundate the floodplain in the restored area.

The Kissimmee River Restoration Project will return flow to 44 miles of the river's historic channel and restore about 40 square miles of river/floodplain ecosystem. The restoration project – a 50-50 partnership with the South Florida Water Management District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – is currently projected to be complete by 2020.

One of the many reasons the Florida Chapter of The Nature Conservancy is engaged in this discussion is that The Nature Conservancy owns the 11,500-acre Disney Wilderness Preserve in the Kissimmee River Watershed in Osceola County, Florida.

Home to more than 1,000 species of plants and animals, The Disney Wilderness Preserve is an essential part of the Everglades ecosystem and contains 3,500 acres of restored wetlands that act as nature's "sponges" in the landscape capturing rain, filtering out nutrients and replenishing our ground water.

The core of The Disney Wilderness Preserve is comprised of what was once an 8,500-acre cattle ranch situated at the head of the Greater Everglades watershed. In the early 1990s, the ranch was slated for extensive residential and commercial development which would have spelled the end for the property's degraded—but restorable—wetlands, as well as the destruction of significant habitat for endangered plants and wildlife.

Through our on-going partnership with Disney, we continue to preserve and protect this land for the enjoyment of future generations and contribute to the ecosystem restoration in the greater Kissimmee River watershed.

As the conclusion of Kissimmee River Restoration nears in 2020, House Resolution 3961 will allow for a study to determine the eligibility of including the fully restored Kissimmee River into the National Wild and Scenic River program to preserve the fully restored free-flowing condition and immediate environment of the river for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

As a nearby landowner and Conservation organization, investigating the feasibility of a Wild and Scenic River designation is worthy of exploration and The Nature Conservancy stands ready to assist and again, our thank you to Congressman Soto.

I am happy to answer any questions.

Thank you.