

OFFICE OF CONGRESSMAN HENRY CUELLAR
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Testimony for National Parks, Forests, And Public Lands Subcommittee

I would like to thank Committee Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Westerman, as well as the National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the subcommittee for having me here today to discuss my legislation, H.R. 2359, to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study to assess the suitability and feasibility of designating certain lands as the Los Caminos del Rio National Heritage Corridor. I would also like to thank my community witness, Christopher Rincon, Director of the River Pierce Foundation, for being here to testify on this legislation.

The Lower Rio Grande is a large and diversified landscape, characterized by historical land uses and architecture, social traditions and ecosystems. A “layering” of successive periods can be experienced as you travel through the corridor. For example, remnant sabal palm grove forests can give a sense of the landscape as it was seen by early Spanish explorers in 1520; land surveys still reflect Spanish land distribution patterns of the mid-18th century in the form of porciones (long tracks of land perpendicular to the river); early ranching forts with walled compounds and tróneras (gun ports) still exists as the ore of some river communities as well as in isolated areas; military forts and battlefields related to the Mexican-American and U.S. Civil Wars, as well as sites related to Mexican political and revolutionary upheavals are dispersed throughout the region; 19th century river trade and the coming railroads spurred tremendous growth and development seen along the river; and mechanized irrigation transformed the semi-arid landscape into today’s commercial and agricultural empire.

The U.S./Mexico “border” itself is a significant landscape feature and theme. Tejano festivals, interchange of Spanish and English languages, Tex-Mex cuisine, bullfighting, religious practices including saint’s days, cemetery decorations, and observations; Mariachi music, matachine dances, charreadas (Mexican-style rodeo), and traditional dress gives one a sense of being “on the border”-- a land apart with its own customs and distinct identity. The boundary given to Los Caminos de Rio has been defined by these cultural-geographic themes and characteristics. The Rio Grande/Rio Bravo is and has always been the lifeblood of the region. Therefore, the concentration of resources naturally lie within a narrow swathe along both sides of the river. Because Los Caminos de Rio Heritage Corridor is expected to have far reaching impact, the corridor boundary is expanded beyond the river itself and includes six Texas counties (Webb, Zapata, Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Jim Hogg).

Overall, the Los Caminos del Rio Region is one of the most ecologically diverse areas in North America with a flourishing blend of history and culture. Recognizing the region as a National Heritage Area will boost the local economy and preserve this South Texas landmark for future generations. I am pleased to support this legislation and will remain committed to championing the heritage of the Rio Grande Valley by helping to conserve the historic and natural areas of South Texas. With that, I say thank you Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member as well as the members of the Committee. I look forward to working with you all on this legislation and I yield back.