

Testimony of Grant Werschull, Smith River Alliance
H.R. 7329 - The Smith River National Recreation Area Expansion Act

**Submitted to the House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on National Parks,
Forests, and Public Lands**
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Chair Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 7329, The Smith River National Recreation Area Expansion Act. I currently serve as a Co-Executive Director of Smith River Alliance and I am a founder and Co-Chair of the Smith River Collaborative, a joint venture of local Tribes, the County of Del Norte, local and regional environmental groups, the Del Norte Fire Safe Council, and the American Forest Resource Council, working in partnership with staff of the Smith River National Recreation Area which is a District within Six Rivers National Forest.

My unique perspective spans over forty years beginning with the creation of the Smith River Alliance (SRA), the organization that led the campaign to establish the Smith River National Recreation Area (NRA) in 1990.

It is an honor to represent the diverse interests in support of H.R. 7329 --- who hope to see the Smith River NRA completed by expanding the boundary to include the watershed in Oregon. In 1990, the land in Oregon was removed from the original legislation and the time is right to correct that omission.

Thank you, Congressman Huffman for sponsoring this bill with Congressman DeFazio. The area under consideration reflects your lifetime commitment to rivers, fish, and conservation. Your leadership is deeply appreciated.

I am pleased to begin with a few facts: **there is strong and broad support for H.R. 7329.**

Specifically, there is strong bipartisan support from the two conservative rural counties that are home to the Smith watershed. Oregon's Curry County Commissioners and California's Del Norte County Board of Supervisors have **Republican majorities which voted unanimously to support H.R. 7329.**

The largest private landowner in the watershed at over 90,000 acres is Green Diamond Resource Company. They also support H.R. 7329.

The proposed expansion area does not include a single acre of private land ---- and there are no grazing allotments or grazing leases anywhere within the area covered by this legislation.

The Smith River watershed is a land of superlatives. It is one of the crown jewels in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System and it is the only major undammed river from source to sea in California. Over 400 miles of the Smith's three Forks and tributaries are protected within the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. This makes the Smith River the #3 river in the United States for miles designated Wild and Scenic --- behind the Klamath and Snake Rivers. It is also

the water supply for multiple downstream communities and **is recognized as one of the premier “salmon strongholds” along the entire Pacific Coast.**

You might wonder what’s so important about a “salmon stronghold?” These are our healthiest rivers and watersheds --- and they function as the source of wild salmon and steelhead for repopulating nearby rivers and streams where restoration makes them more habitable. Thus, salmon strongholds are nature’s proven way of sustaining these iconic species which are so very important to our coastal communities. When I say “proven” that’s because the very principle of how salmon strongholds function is why and how salmon were naturally restored to rivers that were subject to massive landscape-scale volcanic events prior to human settlement. Commercial fisherman, tribes, and sportfishing organizations locally and nationally, all support H.R. 7329. As many of you know, salmon, steelhead, and trout fishing is extremely important to these interests and to our coastal communities.

I hope my testimony will provide insight and context about why this legislation is critically important to the local communities who live in and around the Smith River watershed ---- as well as to the larger United States of America.

H.R. 7329 Overview

Let me describe what the legislation will accomplish in the headwaters of the North Fork Smith River located in Curry County Oregon.

First, it includes a boundary adjustment to add the 58,000 acres of Oregon land into the existing Smith River NRA.

Second, it designates 75.22 miles of wild and scenic rivers, including major North Fork tributaries Baldface and Chrome Creeks.

Third, it contains a permanent mineral withdrawal on Oregon lands --- subject to valid existing rights.

Fourth, the legislation directs the Forest Service to prepare an updated recreation plan for the NRA to reflect the expansion area into Oregon.

Finally, the legislation contains a special study of streams, fens, wetlands and potentially unstable and vulnerable aquatic habitat areas. If this idea seems novel, please understand that this part the world can be very wet during the rainy season. The Smith River watershed has the record for annual rainfall at 240 inches for the lower forty-eight states. Our seasonal rains create ideal conditions for unique wetland habitats, robust perennial and intermittent streams, and an amazing array of native and endemic plants and animals including fish.

It will be obvious to some, but it’s worth noting that the extreme and heavy rainfall that occurs in the Smith River watershed can lead to disastrous consequences where there are extensive disturbances to the landscape ---- such as is required for strip-mining. This fact has been a concern for Smith River water purveyors, the many public and private stakeholder entities, and

the tens of thousands of citizens who submitted comments in support of a permanent mineral withdrawal for the 58,000-acre North Fork Smith River area which is the focus for H.R. 7329.

Smith River National Recreation Area Background (PL - 101 - 612)

HR. 7329 amends the Smith River National Recreation Area Act to add the North Fork Smith River watershed in Oregon. In brief, the 1990 legislation provides a permanent mineral withdrawal across 473 square miles of the watershed in California and managed by the U.S. Forest Service. It also directed the Secretary to: 1) provide a range of recreation opportunities and related public access; 2) restore and improve the anadromous fishery and water quality by placing restrictions or limitations on soil disturbing activities; and 3) provide protections in the form of designated Stream Protection Zones, preserve and increase old growth forest habitat, and 4) aggregate timber management to a specific area and with a purpose of restoring ecological processes and maintaining biological diversity.

The results have been impressive. The NRA has benefited from many recreation access and visitor serving improvements, wildfire preparedness and community protection projects, while consistently exceeding expected timber output. Of course, as this Committee especially knows, the competition for funding is fierce and there is always more to be done to maintain and replace key infrastructure from campground water systems, forest roads, to trails. But overall, the Smith River NRA has earned high marks and the extraordinary support for H.R. 7329 is a testimonial to that statement.

And speaking of forest restoration and community protection, I'd be remiss to not express appreciation to this Committee for two Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration projects on the Smith River NRA; the Little Jones Creek Project and the Big Flat Community Protection Project. Thank you!!! Smith River Collaborative has worked so very hard for these projects which provide for critically important fuel breaks on public and private land to protect multiple Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) communities.

Smith River salmon production and the North Fork Smith River

In my testimony so far, I've highlighted the significance of the Smith River as a "salmon stronghold" for wild salmon, steelhead, and trout. The North Fork in Oregon is an important production area for these species ---- and also for the federally listed coho salmon. We know this because for many years, SRA in partnership with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the California Department of Parks and Recreation implemented a fisheries monitoring program which included fall/winter spawner "escapement" surveys, summer abundance dive counts, and also a downstream migrant trap. Data from these efforts has informed our understanding about salmonid populations basin wide. Yes, despite the obvious challenges of survey work and sampling in the remote reaches of the North Fork, we deployed crews to this area. Regarding long-term monitoring, it's also important to note that the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation has recently taken the lead on establishing permanent sonar counting units (DIDSON) in the lower river for monitoring Chinook salmon and winter steelhead. I'm taking this opportunity to underscore the critical importance of ongoing fisheries monitoring on our salmon and steelhead producing streams and rivers. It is extremely important for our public land managers and their partners to know about the status of our salmonids and other aquatic species.

Monitoring also has the potential to help us better understand and measure the effectiveness of restoration investments and projects.

What I haven't highlighted yet, but many of you already know, is travel and tourism is enormously important to the communities proximate to the Smith River. It is the single-largest component of the Del Norte County economy. When it's rainy and wet and the rivers are bank-full, it's the fishermen who are reserving guides, eating out, and staying in the hotels. But the Smith River and the bioregion are a popular destination for every flavor of outdoor recreationist including kayakers, rafters, hikers, birdwatchers, and people who just want to celebrate the wild rivers, ancient redwood forests, and awesome coastline. The Smith River is in the middle of what is known as "America's Wild Rivers Coast," with the wild and scenic Rogue River to the north and Klamath River to the south.

Of all the rivers along America's Wild Rivers Coast ---- or on the planet, the North Fork Smith River has been acknowledged for its water quality. That's why in 2017 the Oregon Environmental Quality Commission, after years of review and testimony, designated the North Fork Smith River in Oregon, the subject of HR. 7329, as the first Outstanding Resource Water in the Pacific Northwest. Today, it is still the only river so designated in Oregon and Washington.

Yes, the North Fork Smith River in Oregon and the entire Smith River is a national treasure. I've barely mentioned the lower Smith River is home to some of the world's largest and finest groves of ancient redwood forests as part of Redwood National and State Parks --- recognized as a World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve. Nor have I mentioned the **\$100 million in non-federal investments in Smith River salmon restoration and protection over the last twenty years.** This context makes it's easier to understand the extraordinary, diverse, and bipartisan support for the Smith River NRA Expansion Act (H.R. 7329).

Accordingly, I will wrap-up my testimony by listing some of the H.R. 7329 supporters and partners who have been exceptionally helpful and engaged. Here they are in alphabetical order: American Rivers, American Whitewater, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, Big Rock Community Services District, California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, California Senator Mike McGuire who championed and secured a resolution passed by the State Assembly and Senate to protect the North Fork Smith River in Oregon, California Trout, City of Crescent City, Crescent City-Del Norte Chamber of Commerce which includes over 330 businesses, Curry County Commissioners, Del Norte County Board of Supervisors, Elk Valley Rancheria, too many fishing guides and rafting outfitters to mention here, Friends of the River, Gasquet Community Services District, Green Diamond Resource Company, Klamath Forest Alliance, Klamath-Siskiyou Wildland Center, Kokatat, the League of Women Voters of Oregon and California, David Brock Smith of the Oregon House of Representatives and a former Curry County Commissioner, Native Fish Society, the Outdoor Alliance and their eleven affiliate organizations, commercial fishermen represented by the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, Pierson Building Center, Redwood Region Audubon Society, Save the Redwoods League, The Wilderness Society, Trout Unlimited, Western Environmental Law Center, Wild Rivers Water Rights, Wild Salmon Center, Wild and Scenic Rivers championed by fourth generation Curry County resident Alyssa Babin, and the national Wild and Scenic Rivers Coalition.

Finally, I'd like to express my appreciation for the hardworking staff of the Smith River National Recreation Area and Six Rivers National Forest for their dedication and persistence. It's through their diligence that we see the positive relationships and partnerships that exist with the neighboring communities and the Smith River NRA/U.S. Forest Service. Thank you!

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify here today. I welcome any questions you may have about the Smith River watershed, the adjacent communities, and H.R. 7329.

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