

Testimony for the Record
Submitted to the
House Committee on Natural Resources - Subcommittee on Public Lands
for the Hearing
Legislative Hearing on H.R. 642, H.R. 5470, H.R. 6788, H.R. 9269, H.R. 9600, H.R. 9779, H.R.
10128, H.R. 10136 and S. 675

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Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of Congressman Steube's H.R. 642 - Myakka Wild and Scenic River Act of 2025.

I am Miri Hardy from Sarasota County, Florida, Founder and Executive Director of Myakka River Partnership, an organization that provides an independent voice for the Myakka River Watershed. For the past 3.5 years, I have spearheaded Sarasota County's collaborative community effort to designate the Myakka River in Sarasota County as a Partnership Wild and Scenic River.

The Myakka River, one of Florida's most treasured natural resources, is located in Southwest Florida. Thirty four miles of this rain-fed, blackwater river meander through Sarasota County, a rapidly growing area, and a prime tourism spot.

The Myakka River in Sarasota County has remained an exceptional river, thanks to the foresight of legislators past and present, who appreciated the river's unique natural features as well as its importance for our community's safety, quality of life and economy. Indeed recently, with a proclamation from our Commissioners, we celebrated 50 years of Sarasota County's commitment to the river, and the anniversary of its first attempt to seek National Wild and Scenic designation.

As a result of those early efforts, in 1985, the Myakka River was subject to a congressionally authorized National Park Service Wild and Scenic River Study. It was found eligible for designation but not suitable, because at the time, the Service did not have a model of designation and management for rivers such as the Myakka, that did not flow through federal lands.

Undeterred, Sarasota County pursued, and received, designation as Florida's first State-designated Wild and Scenic River. This designation resulted in a state rule and local regulations, to protect the river and its shorelines.

Additionally, the Florida legislature established the Myakka River Management Coordinating Council, to manage the river. The council includes diverse river stakeholders, from private land owners to local and state government bodies. Finally, to further ensure the preservation of this vital natural resource, thousands of acres in the watershed have since been conserved by the state, county and private land owners.

In the 1990s, a new model of Federal designation called Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers was introduced, to meet the needs of rivers, like the Myakka, that flow through non-federal lands. Partnership rivers are jointly managed by the National Park Service and a local river management council, based on local needs and local values. The National Park Service provides technical and financial support, as appropriated by Congress, without federal ownership or development of facilities.

Importantly, the Partnership model relies on existing local zoning ordinances, such as were put in place in Sarasota County as result of the state designation in 1985. It also requires a local management council and a river management plan, which the Myakka River in Sarasota County has. Based on this existing infrastructure, an update study recently conducted by the National Park Service confirmed present-day eligibility and suitability of the thirty four miles of the Myakka River in Sarasota County as a Partnership Wild and Scenic River.

In the best interest of our community and river, in December 2023 the Myakka River Management Coordinating Council approached Congressman Steube to seek congressional support for designation. Congressman Steube's resulting H.R. 642 has a broad base of support ranging from local and state government agencies to Sarasota County building, tourism and commerce associations.

This widespread support stems from a consensus that partnership designation reflects a balanced approach that celebrates and protects a treasured natural resource while respecting economic growth and private property rights.

It will help us enhance the river's outstanding recreational values - which are key economic drivers - while improving existing habitats for our native wildlife. It will also support work needed to enhance the Myakka River Watershed's ability to provide important ecological services, such as air quality regulation, water filtering, flow regulation and flood mitigation, which are critical for our community's safety and our local economy.

After years of building the necessary regulatory infrastructure and partnerships, Sarasota County is ready and eager to join the exclusive group of our nation's greatest rivers. Thank you for your consideration of this impactful bill.