STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER AND POWER, OF THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE, CONCERNING THE NATIONAL BLUEWAYS SYSTEM.

July 17, 2013

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the views of the Department of the Interior (Interior) on the National Blueways System.

Healthy rivers and watersheds are among America's most loved national treasures. These resources are vital to local economies, to enjoyment of the natural world, and to the quality of the environment on which we all depend. Healthy rivers and watersheds provide jobs and revenue for local communities, enhanced opportunities for outdoor recreation and tourism, reliable supplies of clean water, flood and drought protection, habitat and migration corridors for fish and game, and other valuable economic, social and ecological services. Across the country, local groups, communities, individuals, businesses, tribes, conservation districts and state and local governments have been working to protect their rivers and watersheds for their economic and ecological values.

Establishment

To recognize and support these locally-led efforts to sustain the economic, recreational, and natural values of rivers and watersheds of national significance, then Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar signed Secretarial Order # 3321 on May 24, 2012, establishing the National Blueways System. The National Blueways System is intended to recognize and support exemplary river and watershed partnerships that request this recognition. These partnerships collaborate, cooperate, and promote nationally significant rivers and their watersheds that are highly valued as economic, recreational, social, and ecological assets by the communities that depend on them. National Blueways are locally envisioned and led by diverse stakeholder partnerships consisting of the communities, organizations, and agencies that have an interest in the welfare of their river, its watershed, its resources, and the public. National Blueways partnerships use a landscape-scale approach to river conservation that integrates land and water stewardship efforts within a working landscape from headwaters to mouth and across entire watersheds.

The National Blueways System is a voluntary program intended to highlight and support successful collaborative strategies for sustainable river and watershed resources led by diverse stakeholder communities and organizations. Inclusion in the National Blueways System recognizes and supports river system stewardship efforts that enhance abundant conservation, environmental education, recreation, and economic opportunities. This recognition program is intended to reward the work of stakeholder partnerships and provide federal support to increase collaboration among diverse partners. A National Blueways System also will help coordinate federal, state, tribal and local partners to promote best practices, share information and resources, and encourage active and collaborative stewardship of rivers and their watersheds across the country.

In these ways, the National Blueways program is intended to support conservation efforts and bolster valuable economic growth and job creation providing long-term value for the American people. The success of the stewardship of these rivers is an important component of the America's Great Outdoors initiative, which supports a community-driven conservation and recreation agenda for the 21st century.

The Secretarial Order was issued in accordance with authorities provided under the Take Pride in America Act, Public Law 101-628; the Outdoor Recreation Act, Public Law 87-714; and the Cooperative Watershed Management Program of the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, Public Law 111-11. In addition, the agencies within Interior have a broad panoply of legal authority to carry out their respective missions that support enhancing river recreation, undertaking river restoration, and pursuing river protection initiatives to pass on healthy rivers to future generations.

The Secretarial Order directs Interior agencies to collaborate in supporting the National Blueways System to the extent permitted by law and consistent with their missions and resources. It also establishes an inter-agency committee (the National Blueways Committee) to provide leadership, support, and coordination to the program. The Committee includes representatives of Interior and its agencies, including the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey, in addition to representatives of the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Army (Civil). In January 2013, Interior, USDA, and the Army (Civil Works) signed a Memorandum of Understanding demonstrating continued support by these agencies of the National Blueways System and, in particular, enhancement of river-oriented outdoor recreation and education, natural resource stewardship, and sustainable economic development at a watershed-scale.

Recognition of the Connecticut River

Simultaneously with the issuance of the Secretarial Order, then Secretary Salazar recognized the long-standing, exemplary work of local stakeholders and, at their request, designated the Connecticut River and its watershed as the first National Blueway to serve as an inspiration and model for future designations. The 410 mile long Connecticut River and its 7.2 million-acre watershed covers parts of Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont, and its watershed includes the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, which contains sub-boreal forests, floodplains, a major migratory pathway, and a globally recognized wetland. The Connecticut River is also an important economic resource to the 2.4 million residents and 396 communities in the watershed. Annually, 1.4 million people enjoy the recreational opportunities presented by the watershed, including National Recreation Trails, scenic byways, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and National Natural Landmarks. These and other recreation opportunities contribute an estimated $1.0 billion to local economies, according to the Trust for Public Land.

The Connecticut River National Blueway designation recognizes and supports over a half century of successful and expanding local and regional collaboration between local, state, and federal governments, organizations, landowners, and numerous other stakeholders. In response

to an invitation from Secretary Salazar to identify top priority recreation and conservation projects for President Obama's America's Great Outdoors Initiative, the Governors of Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont identified the Connecticut River and Valley, and sought ways to partner with federal agencies on collaborative conservation in the Connecticut River watershed. The designation recognizes the efforts of more than 40 organizations and agencies working together for nearly a decade to shape and pursue a vision for a healthy Connecticut River and its watershed. Support for this recognition has been positive and sustained.

Recognition of the White River Watershed

The nomination for the White River Watershed to be recognized as a National Blueway was made on August 24, 2012, by a diverse, locally-led watershed partnership which included a wide array of state and local stakeholders involved with the White River and its watershed in Arkansas and Missouri. The National Blueways Committee found that the White River Watershed met the criteria for National Blueway recognition, and on January 8, 2013, then Secretary Salazar added the White River Watershed in Arkansas and Missouri to the National Blueways System.

The proponents of this nomination hoped that designation would be a catalyst to promote connecting the conservation actions of the upper watershed in the highlands with the floodplain systems of the lower watershed, and would foster new partnerships, strengthen existing relationships, connect communities, engage stakeholders, and benefit the local economies. However, in letters dated June 28, 2013, and July 2, 2013, the state and local stakeholders involved with the nomination of the White River Watershed as a National Blueway requested that the designation be withdrawn.

Because the National Blueways program is a locally-led program, on July 3, after receiving letters from these stakeholders, and with the concurring recommendation of the National Blueways Committee, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell withdrew the designation.

Benefits of Recognition

Recognition as a National Blueway for rivers and watersheds of national significance is intended to promote and conserve economic, recreational, and natural values of healthy river systems from source to outlet and across watersheds. The National Blueways program does not establish a new protective status or regulation of lands, either public or private, nor does it impose use limitations or other requirements. The Secretarial Order establishing the program was clear in stating its intent that the Blueways recognition does not authorize or affect the use of private property, nor be the basis for the exercise of any new regulatory authority. Instead, recognition as a National Blueway is a means of identifying the collaborative efforts of stakeholders and, by virtue of that recognition, encouraging support for existing local and regional conservation, recreation, and restoration efforts. Within Interior, it is also a means of coordination among our various bureaus with ongoing federal, State, tribal and local activities.

The program is an example of a multi-agency/organization partnership addressing the full variety of seemingly unconnected activities necessary for successful landscape-scale conservation.

National Blueway recognition is intended to expand the opportunities for stakeholder organizations involved in a watershed-wide initiative, and to help make the federal government a more effective partner through enhanced communication, coordination and collaboration. This coordination is intended to improve ecosystem services and, in the long term, increase the sustainability of natural resources and dependent local economies, providing a better quality of life for residents of the watershed.

The National Blueways program is entirely voluntary, and private landowners, local groups, local communities, businesses, state and local government agencies, are free to choose to not participate in any assistance programs or initiatives undertaken by the stakeholder partnership.

Such benefits are already starting to emerge from the Connecticut River designation including expanded participation of stakeholder groups and better coordination among the many groups that share similar programs and goals but may not have worked together given the size of the watershed. A Memorandum of Understanding between DOI, USDA and Army (Civil Works) was signed in September, 2012, committing federal agencies with land and water management responsibilities in the Connecticut River watershed to work together, consistent with each agency's priorities and legal authorities, to support the stakeholder partnership's efforts to enhance recreation, conservation, education and economic activities. An online river atlas is under development for use by stakeholders to share information with the public about Blueway-related activities and opportunities on the river.

Conclusion

Enjoying and protecting the Nation's lands and waters is an American value that crosses regional, demographic, and political lines. The voluntary partnerships fostered under this program encourage a broad range of stakeholders from federal, state, tribal, and local governments to non-profit organizations, private landowners, and businesses to work together toward a vision of healthier rivers and watersheds that benefit the economy and conservation. The Administration is committed to encouraging innovative partnerships in communities across the nation, expanding access to rivers and trails, maintaining wildlife corridors, and promoting conservation while working to protect historic uses of the land including ranching, farming, and forestry. The National Blueways System supports and recognizes exemplary partnerships promoting a landscape-scale approach to river conservation within a working landscape. Interior is proud of these shared accomplishments, and looks forward to what can be achieved in the future through these partnerships.