

September 8, 2009

The Honorable Nick Rahall
The House Natural Resources Committee
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington DC 20515

RE: H.R. 2806, Boundary Adjustment to the Stephen Mather Wilderness in North Cascades National Park to Allow Rebuilding of the Stehekin River Road

Dear Representative Rahall:

On behalf of American Whitewater we wish to voice our support for the National Park Service decision to permanently retire the upper reaches of the Stehekin Road within North Cascades National Park. We urge you and other members of the Committee to oppose H.R. 2806 which would overturn the decision of the National Park Service to retire the upper Stehekin Road.

American Whitewater is a national non-profit 501(c)(3) river conservation organization founded in 1954. We have over 6,500 members and 100 local-based affiliate clubs, representing approximately 80,000 whitewater paddlers across the nation. American Whitewater's mission is to conserve and restore America's whitewater resources and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely. As a conservation-oriented paddling organization, American Whitewater has an interest in the Stehekin River. Nationally significant "outstandingly remarkable values" on this river include wildlife, fish, prehistoric resources, historic resources, geology, scenic resources, and recreation that have made this river eligible for Wild and Scenic designation. Our members use this river for whitewater recreation. Some boat the Lower Stehekin from High Bridge to Lake Chelan or Tumwater gorge from Car Wash Falls to High Bridge which are accessible from the existing road, and others hike in or paddle down Bridge Creek to float the Upper Stehekin which provides outstanding opportunities for backcountry paddling and fishing.

American Whitewater is not philosophically opposed to wilderness boundary adjustments especially in situations such as this where the action would relocate a section of the road out of the channel migration zone, and in situations where there is a clearly demonstrated management need for public vehicle access. Our members engage in active recreation on public lands and waters and access to these places is important. However in this case we are opposed to building a new road in an area currently designated as wilderness given the high cost relative to public benefits and our belief that the need for public vehicle access has not been demonstrated. The public can not drive to Stehekin as the community is not connected to the state's road network. During a recent site visit we observed that while the road is open beyond High Bridge to individuals who do have cars in the valley, the vast majority of users were hiking or traveling on stock. In May 2006 the National Park Service completed an extensive Environmental Assessment and determined that rebuilding the road was not in the public interest.¹ Professional resource planners found that the best way to protect park resources, save taxpayer money, and maintain public enjoyment of the Stehekin River was to retire

¹ Upper Stehekin Valley Road Car Wash Falls (MP 12.9) to Cottonwood Camp (MP 22.8) Environmental Assessment March 29, 2006 <<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/projectHome.cfm?parkId=327&projectId=15383>>

the upper sections of the road. Based on our own assessment, input from our members who enjoy the valley, and the review by National Park Service professionals we conclude that adequate access to the upper reaches of the Stehekin Valley is available by hiking, stock, and watercraft.

Building a new section of road will be not guarantee against future damage due to natural events and ongoing maintenance is likely be significant. The relocated section will be subject to landslides and remaining sections of the road will still be damaged by future flood events. This proposal comes at a time when the National Park Service and other public land management agencies are stretched for resources to maintain visitor centers, and good road access and trail systems for recreational use of our public lands. All land managers should be looking towards achieving sustainable road networks for the units they manage, road networks that meet true public need and that are within the realistic resources of agency budgets to maintain. Scare funds can be better directed to the locations along the Lower Stehekin River where community infrastructure, lodging facilities, administrative facilities, and visitor services are located. North Cascades National Park is currently engaged in a developing the Stehekin River Corridor Implementation Plan. This planning effort is focused on management strategies to address increased frequency of major flood events and the need to balance impacts to community and park infrastructure with protection of resource values.

In conclusion, we believe the National Park Service made the right decision to retire the Upper Stehekin Road. If Congress chooses to revisit this decision additional information is needed including a more clearly defined route for any proposed road, and additional environmental review that more accurately defines the cost of rebuilding and maintaining the road in light of local geology, climate, and public need for vehicle access both locally and in a regional context. This road has historically served a small number of vehicles given the lack of connectivity to the state's road network; there are no private residences on this road and no park administrative facilities or visitor center. We agree with the National Park Service that retiring the upper Stehekin Road and maintaining focus on the lower Stehekin Road will achieve the goals of protecting park resources, saving taxpayer money, and maintain public enjoyment of this incredible natural resource.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. O'Keefe', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Thomas O'Keefe, PhD
Pacific Northwest Stewardship Director

cc:

The Honorable Patty Murray
The Honorable Maria Cantwell
The Honorable Jay Inslee
The Honorable Rick Larsen
The Honorable Doc Hastings
The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers