

**Testimony of Thomas O'Keefe
On behalf of American Whitewater
Before the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Marine Waters
On Senate Bill 5622
February 2, 2011**

Chairman Ranker and members of the Committee, my name is Thomas O'Keefe, and I am the Pacific Northwest Stewardship Director for American Whitewater.

Interest of American Whitewater

American Whitewater is a national non-profit 501(c)(3) river conservation organization founded in 1954. 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, we have over 5000 individual members and 100 local-based affiliate clubs, representing whitewater paddlers across the nation. Through our clubs and individual members in Washington we directly represent a population of approximately 3000 paddling enthusiasts in the state.

Comments of American Whitewater

American Whitewater is here to support Senate Bill 5622. Our state lands managed by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Washington Department of Natural Resources, and Washington State Parks collectively represent some of our nation's most outstanding recreational assets and are a defining feature of our quality of life here.

The active outdoor recreation community has a long history of advocacy for state lands. Examples include the efforts of the climbing community to bring Peshastin Pinnacles into public ownership and the whitewater paddling community who worked to protect the Green River Gorge through a series of State Parks that includes Kanaskat-Palmer, Jellum, and Flaming Geyser.

Many of our members feel strongly that investment in our public lands is an important role for state government. These open spaces make significant contributions to our local economies and quality of life—they represent our competitive advantage in the changing global economy important to regional employers seeking to attract a competitive work force. In addition our public lands provide important health benefits that can be measured in terms of cost savings in public health expenditures.¹ For these reasons we feel it is extremely important to carefully consider the implications of instituting a new fee structure

¹ *The Contribution of Recreation and Parks to Reducing Health Care Costs: From Theory to Practice.* Godbey, Geoffrey. 1993. In *Trends: Justifying Recreation and Parks to Decision Makers*, v. 30, no. 4.

and associated barriers to access our public lands. In light of these considerations, we feel that the \$30 Discover Pass represents an appropriate step towards meeting the anticipated funding gap for our state land managing agencies in light of the current state budget situation but it should not represent the only source of funding. In addition, there needs to be an explicit commitment to evaluate the overall effectiveness of this approach following initial implementation.

In surveying our membership two significant issues were raised with regard to any access pass for state lands and we appreciate the fact that the proposed legislation addresses these concerns:

1) There needs to be one pass to address the finding that the recreating public cannot readily discern which agency of the state is responsible for the management of particular lands. We do not want to see one pass for WDFW water access sites, fee collection at State Parks, and a new individual license as has been considered for DNR lands. We ask that you resist the urge to start making special exceptions for different user groups. The elegance of the proposed legislation is that everyone is covered by one common system that is simple and easy to understand. Our support is contingent on a simple integrated system. For example, those who purchase a fishing and hunting license should not be eligible for subsidized access to State Parks any more than someone who camps would be eligible for a subsidized fishing license. Instead of the current practice of including access to state lands as a portion of hunting and fishing license fees we recommend reducing the license fees accordingly and integrating all users into the single system for access to public lands.

2) The Discover Pass should be easy to purchase. We support the proposal to make the pass available at the time of vehicle registration and through the WDFW licensing system. We wish to propose an additional suggestion that the \$10 day-use fee could be applied to the purchase of an annual pass. Several states have such a system where you can purchase a day-pass and then mail it in within 30 days with the additional fee to purchase an annual pass.

Summary

We are committed to working with the committee to further refine this legislation and appreciate the perspective that this is a working model that we can improve upon. Outstanding questions remain regarding the revenue that can be raised through the proposed approach. A combination of user fees and state funding must be able to address the need created by increasing demand for outdoor recreation opportunities. The ultimate solution needs to keep state-managed lands open and accessible to the public at a reasonable cost to the user. We thank you for the opportunity to speak before the committee today.