

**STATEMENT OF DANIEL N. WENK, ACTING DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS, OF THE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, CONCERNING H.R. 2167, TO AUTHORIZE THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO CONDUCT A STUDY TO ASSESS THE SUITABILITY AND FEASIBILITY OF DESIGNATING CERTAIN LANDS AS THE LOS CAMINOS DEL RIO NATIONAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.**

**JULY 8, 2009**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior on H.R. 2167, a bill to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study to assess the suitability and feasibility of designating certain lands as the Los Caminos del Rio National Heritage Corridor.

The Department supports H.R. 2167. However, we feel that priority should be given to the 47 previously authorized studies for potential units of the National Park System, potential new National Heritage Areas, and potential additions to the National Trails System and National Wild and Scenic River System that have not yet been transmitted to Congress.

H.R. 2167 would direct the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) to conduct a study to assess the suitability and feasibility of designating the Los Caminos del Rio, along the Lower Rio Grande in Texas, as a National Heritage Corridor. In completing the study, the Secretary is directed to work with the Texas State Historic Preservation Officer, historical societies, tourism offices, and other appropriate organizations or agencies. The Secretary is directed to submit a report to Congress that states the findings of the study and any conclusions and recommendations based upon the study no later than the end of the third fiscal year after the date on which funds for the

study are first made available. We estimate that this study will cost approximately \$200,000 to \$300,000.

Stretching for 200 miles between the cities of Laredo/Nuevo Laredo and Brownsville/Matamoros, the area known as Los Caminos del Rio encompasses farms and ranches, fast-growing cities, and dusty small towns whose history and architecture reflect a rich blend of Hispanic, Latino, and Anglo cultures.

Located along the Lower Rio Grande, the river plays an important role in unifying the region's inhabitants, linking and unifying communities on both sides of the border for more than 250 years. Besides being a major source of fresh water for the region, the river also has influenced colonial settlement, ranching, river trade, and military conflicts in the region.

The Lower Rio Grande is located in one of the most ecologically complex and diverse regions in North America and ecotourism is playing an increasingly more important role along the river. Bird watching, photography, wildlife viewing, and canoeing are just a few of the activities that are becoming more popular in the region. There is increasing interest in utilizing the Lower Rio Grande as a canoeing, kayaking, and white water rafting venue, because it is an area that can be used throughout the year but especially in the winter months.

Efforts to recognize the cultural heritage of the area along the Lower Rio Grande began in the early 1990s. Originally begun through a partnership developed by a Texas State Interagency Task Force, participants on both sides of the border have produced a survey of cultural resources

of the Lower Rio Grande, an interpretive visitor guide, and a documentary that highlights the historical and architectural significance of the border region. An active local group, the Los Caminos del Rio Inc., currently coordinates activities along the river corridor.

The National Park Service (NPS) has provided technical assistance in this area, participating as a member of the original task force. In December 2008, the Los Caminos del Rio Inc. was selected to receive technical assistance for one year to help identify water and land trail corridors in existing irrigation and drainage ditches, levees, and connecting spaces. In this effort, the NPS will develop priorities and standards for an implementation trail plan for the Lower Rio Grande Valley Trails Network.

As part of the study proposed in H.R. 2167 the NPS would consider the heritage of both the U.S. and Mexican sides of the Lower Rio Grande and would make recommendations of how a Heritage Corridor could most effectively function in the area, keeping in mind the needs of both countries and any concerns relating to border security.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions that you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.