

STATEMENT OF DANIEL N. WENK, ACTING DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS CONCERNING H.R. 481, A BILL TO REVISE THE AUTHORIZED ROUTE OF THE NORTH COUNTRY NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL IN NORTHEASTERN MINNESOTA TO INCLUDE EXISTING HIKING TRAILS ALONG LAKE SUPERIOR'S NORTH SHORE AND IN SUPERIOR NATIONAL FOREST AND CHIPPEWA NATIONAL FOREST

July 8, 2009

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the Department of the Interior's views on H.R. 481, a bill to revise the authorized route of the North Country National Scenic Trail in northeastern Minnesota to include existing hiking trails along Lake Superior's north shore and in Superior National Forest and Chippewa National Forest.

The Department supports enactment of H.R. 481 with two amendments described later in this statement. This legislation would amend section 5(a)(8) of the National Trails System Act to revise the route of the North Country National Scenic Trail in northeastern Minnesota and increase the overall length of the trail to 4,600 miles. This reflects current measurements of the trail's length plus the additional 400 miles of the revised route in northeastern Minnesota. The bill includes the reference for a map that would depict the revised route of the trail.

The North Country National Scenic Trail was authorized by Congress in 1980 to provide superlative outdoor recreation opportunities and conservation of nationally significant scenic, historic, natural and cultural qualities along the trail corridor, to provide a premier hiking trail facility, and to encourage and assist volunteer citizen involvement in the planning, development,

maintenance and management of the trail. The National Park Service (NPS) administers this trail. The comprehensive management plan for the trail was issued in 1982.

The authorized route of the trail in northeastern Minnesota traverses more than 70 miles of black spruce and tamarack swamp, extending westward from Jay Cooke State Park, south of Duluth, to the Chippewa National Forest, southwest of Grand Rapids. Because of the location and difficult environmental conditions within the swamp, no portion of this section of the trail has been constructed. The proposed revised route uses three existing hiking trails all developed or redeveloped by volunteers since the Comprehensive Management Plan for the North Country Trail was written. These trails, totaling over 300 miles of existing hiking trail, follow the north shore of Lake Superior and traverse the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in the Superior National Forest, a region of the state known locally as the “Arrowhead.” The proposed change has become known in the North Country Trail community as the “Arrowhead Reroute.”

Since 1987, Minnesota hiking groups have requested the NPS to study the revised route and consider their recommendation for a change due to the location and the existing environmental conditions of the present segment. As a result, the NPS conducted the *Northeastern Minnesota Route Assessment* between 1999 and 2004. This study evaluated and compared two routes—the one authorized by Congress in 1980 and the Arrowhead Reroute. In 2003 and 2004 public meetings were held in Duluth, Ely, Grand Rapids, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. No comments opposing the proposed change in the route were received, either at the public meetings or by mail or email during the widely-publicized public comment period. The plan and environmental assessment was approved by the NPS Midwest Regional Director on September 30, 2004.

The National Trails System Act states that segments of a national scenic trail may be relocated upon a determination that the relocation is necessary to preserve the purposes of the trail and to promote a sound land management program. The authorized route through 70 miles of densely wooded wetlands does not provide a superlative outdoor recreation experience. To provide a premier hiking experience and preserve the landscape would require the construction of many miles of boardwalk in order to successfully traverse those wetlands. This factor alone has not and will not encourage volunteers to become involved in establishing that route.

In stark contrast, the revised Arrowhead Reroute connects nationally significant natural, cultural, and recreational resources with outstanding scenery that epitomizes the “North Country” and has already encouraged volunteers to become involved in planning, developing, maintaining, and managing trails. Additionally, the relocation promotes a sound land management program, using established trails and proposing additional trail segments that are appropriately located and managed in accordance with established multiple-use principles.

Approximately three-quarters of the Arrowhead Reroute already exists, having been built as part of the three existing hiking trails—the Superior Hiking Trail, Border Route Trail, and Kekekabic Trail. New sections that would need to be constructed to complete the reroute in the Chippewa and Superior National Forests, Minnesota state parks and forests, and county-owned lands would be reviewed for environmental impacts on critical habitat, endangered species, wetlands, and cultural resources. Where no public land exists, the trail would be developed on private property but only with the owners’ permission and support.

There is strong support for the trail relocation among public agencies and jurisdictions. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has been a strong proponent of the relocation since the late 1980s. Also, the supervisors of the Superior National Forest and the Chippewa National Forest have indicated their support for the proposed relocated route. Local governments in Duluth, Ely, and Grand Rapids have been supportive.

Duluth and St. Louis County have already approved the extension of the Superior Hiking Trail across city and county parkland to connect Jay Cooke State Park to the south with Two Harbors to the north, the former southern terminus of the Superior Hiking Trail. More than 39 miles of new trail have been built in the city along with six additional miles between Duluth and Two Harbors. Recently, one city along the authorized route voiced opposition because they will no longer be on the official route—a route that is environmentally unfeasible. However, they did not voice this opposition during the study and public comment period back in 2004.

The North Country Trail Association and the Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota are committed to developing the connecting trail segments that will be needed between Ely and the Chippewa National Forest. The Council has pledged not only the workers to build and maintain the trail, but also the effort and funding needed to secure private lands.

The NPS anticipates the cost of adding this route and constructing a footpath to be very low. The construction would be done primarily by volunteers using hand tools. Current NPS staff would provide route planning and support for the volunteers who help develop and maintain the path. Funding would be needed to supply trail markers, signage, tools, equipment, and materials to the

volunteers for the 400 additional miles of trail. The average cost is estimated to be \$100 per mile per year, or \$40,000 per year.

The portions of the North Country Trail reroute yet to be built have not been laid out in detail. No specific landowners have been identified or contacted. Rather, the route assessment (study) identified a corridor several miles wide within which the trail will eventually be laid out. This will allow the NPS and its partners to design a route that will minimize the amount of private land involved and to work with landowners on a voluntary basis—if one landowner is not interested in having the trail on his property, perhaps a neighbor will be amenable. Consequently, no estimates of land acquisition costs have been developed.

Up until March 30 of this year, the Federal government was prohibited from spending funds to acquire lands for the North Country National Scenic Trail outside the exterior boundaries of existing Federal areas. However, Federal funds could be granted to others to assist them in acquiring these lands. In FY 2000 Congress directed the NPS to grant \$500,000 from the Land and Water Conservation Fund to the state of Wisconsin for acquisition of lands for the North Country Trail. Public Law 111-11, the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, provides authority for Federal agencies to acquire lands or interests in lands from willing sellers for the North Country National Scenic Trail.

We recommend that H.R. 481 be amended to make the language consistent with other bills that identify where maps should be kept. We also recommend that the bill be amended to add the “willing seller” land acquisition authority included in Public Law 111-11. Without this additional

language, the enactment of H.R. 481 would repeal this authority. The proposed amendments are attached to this testimony.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I would be glad to answer any questions that you or other members of the subcommittee may have.

Suggested amendments to H.R. 481

On page 4, line 14, strike “office of the Director,” and insert “appropriate offices of the”

On page 4, line 17 add the following sentence at the end:

“No land or interest in land outside the exterior boundaries of any federally administered area may be acquired by the Federal Government for the trail except with the consent of the owner of the land or interest in land.”