

STATEMENT OF DANIEL N. WENK, ACTING DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES CONCERNING S. 1270, TO MODIFY THE BOUNDARY OF THE OREGON CAVES NATIONAL MONUMENT, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

JULY 22, 2009

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior on S. 1270, a bill to modify the boundary of Oregon Caves National Monument, and for other purposes.

The Department supports the intent of S. 1270 as consistent with the General Management Plan (GMP) for the park, but recommends deferring action on the bill to give us the opportunity to continue exploring ways to maintain interagency coordination. DOI and USDA look forward to reporting on these discussions within 6 months.

S. 1270 would adjust the boundary of Oregon Caves National Monument to include the addition of approximately 4,070 acres to enhance the protection of resources associated with the monument and to increase quality recreation opportunities. The lands that would be added are currently managed by the U.S. Forest Service as part of the Rogue-Siskiyou National Forest.

S. 1270 would designate approximately 7.6 miles of these waterways as wild, scenic, or recreational under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, including the first subterranean designated waterway in the country, the River Styx, which flows through the caves as a “recreational” river.

S. 1270 provides authority for the Secretary to protect the water quality – in the caves and for public consumption – and to administer the lands in accordance with current laws and regulations. The Secretary is also directed to carry out ecological forest restoration activities that would establish a fire regime, manage revegetation projects, and reduce the risk of losing key ecosystem components. The land that this bill would transfer is categorized by the U.S. Forest Service as condition class 3 – high risk of fire. Most of it is also designated as Late Successional Reserve under the Northwest Forest Plan. We understand that the Forest Service is currently working on a multi-year effort to reduce fuels under a comprehensive forest plan which is intended to help restore the appropriate role of fire in the entire ecosystem, which in turn would benefit monument resources that are at risk from fire and fire suppression damage.

The bill also requires the Secretary to accept any grazing lease or permit that is donated by a lessee or permittee and further requires that no new leases or permits be granted.

In 1907, the Secretary of the Interior withdrew approximately 2,560 acres for the purposes of establishing a national monument. The 1909 presidential proclamation establishing Oregon Caves National Monument included only 480 acres. The monument was managed by the U.S. Forest Service until its administration was transferred to the National Park Service in 1933. The remaining withdrawal outside of the monument is administered by the USFS as part of the Rogue-Siskiyou National Forest. S. 1270 restores these lands to the original monument boundary.

The explorer Joaquin Miller extolled “The Wondrous marble halls of Oregon!” when speaking about the newly proclaimed Oregon Caves National Monument in 1909. Oregon Caves is one of the few marble caves in the country that is accessible to the public. This park, tucked up in the winding roads of southern Oregon, is known for its remoteness, the cave majesty and unusual biota.

The stream flowing from the cave entrance is a tributary to a watershed that empties into the Pacific Ocean. There are no human-made obstructions that would prevent salmon migration, which makes this the only cave in the National Park Service with an unobstructed link to the ocean.

The caves are nationally significant and a favorite visit for school kids and travelers alike. They remain alive and healthy because of the watershed above them. The park recognized this when developing the 1998 GMP and accompanying Environmental Impact Statement. The plan recommended the inclusion of the watershed into the park to provide for better cave protection and to protect the surface and subsurface hydrology and the public water supply.

If S. 1270 were enacted, there would be no acquisition costs associated with the boundary expansion and we estimate National Park Service’s management, administrative, interpretive, resource protection, and maintenance costs to be approximately \$300,000 to \$750,000 annually.

The Department has four major issues with the bill at this time:

1. Section 6 of the bill designates the River Styx as a recreational river. The recreational status does not afford any additional protection to the water or cave resources and may encumber the current management of the cave resources.
2. Section 7 of the bill requires the Secretary to ensure that forest attributes remain intact and functioning within a “historical range”. However, because of environmental uncertainties, it may be more prudent to use “normal range of ecosystem variability” rather than “historical range”.
3. Section 8 of the bill requires that if a grazing permittee or lessee chooses to voluntarily donate a grazing permit or lease within either the Big Grayback Grazing Allotment (managed by the U.S. Forest Service) or the Billy Mountain Grazing Allotment (managed by the BLM) the Secretary shall accept the donation, terminate those permits or leases and that those allotments shall be permanently retired. It is our understanding that the same individual runs livestock on both the Big Grayback and Billy Mountain Allotments. We note that the Billy Mountain Grazing Allotment is approximately 15 miles from the boundary of the proposed monument expansion. We would like the opportunity to work with the Committee and sponsor to further explore these grazing provisions.
4. Section 9 of the bill discusses hunting, fishing and trapping. We support the Administrative Exceptions under subsection (b) since it provides flexibility in managing the resources within the preserve. With respect to Section 9, we would like to terminate hunting within the preserve after five years with the acreage being converted to national monument status. We base this request on the information collected during the public participation process for the General Management

Plan. Of the 892 comments received on the plan, only 8, less than one percent, expressed concern about the loss of hunting should the added acres be designated as part of the national monument.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.