

Statement of Glenn Casamassa
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Before the
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests and Mining
Concerning
S. 1959 – Central Coast Heritage Protection Act
August 22, 2018

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regarding S. 1959, the Central Coast Heritage Protection Act.

We recognize and appreciate the ongoing multi-year efforts of the sponsor and subcommittee toward improving the manageability of the multiple areas identified in this legislation. S. 1959 designates certain National Forest System (NFS) lands on the Los Padres National Forest in California as wilderness, creates additions to existing wildernesses, and designates Potential Wilderness Areas, Scenic Areas, and a National Recreation Trail. The legislation directs the Forest Service to study the feasibility of connecting the northern and southern portions of the Los Padres National Forest using a trail corridor, the feasibility of opening a new trail to an existing off-highway vehicle trail system, and the possibility of improving non-motorized recreation trail opportunities on certain lands. Finally, the bill includes a provision to ensure Tribes have access to wilderness, scenic areas, and potential wilderness areas for traditional cultural and religious purposes.

Specifically, the bill includes additions to eight designated wilderness areas and one new wilderness designation for a total of 167,413 acres of NFS lands; provisions for two Potential Wilderness areas that would convert to two additions to designated wilderness areas within 20 years for a total of 41,937 acres; additions to three existing wild and scenic rivers and designation of three new wild and scenic rivers, adding a total of 230.8 miles to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System; provisions creating the Condor Ridge and Black Mountain Scenic Areas comprising 41,837 acres; and creating the Condor National Recreation Trail. USDA is generally supportive of the 24 additions to eight existing wilderness areas listed in Sections 3(a)(4) to 3(a)(11), the designation of the new Diablo Caliente wilderness in Section 3(12), and Sections 4 and 7 designating the Machesna Mountain Potential Wilderness and the Fox Mountain Potential Wilderness areas. USDA would like to work with the subcommittee on minor technical corrections required to ensure that the acres listed in the legislation match the acres shown on the maps referenced in the bill. Also, USDA would like to ensure a consistent and deliberate approach to mapping the areas proposed for wilderness to ensure maximum manageability of the wilderness, including forest health and resiliency.

Sections 4(b) and 7(b) require maps and legal descriptions for the boundaries of the potential wilderness areas, and Sections 4(g) and 7(g) require updated maps and legal descriptions when the trail(s) have been reconstructed, realigned or rerouted. Until the areas are designated as wilderness, USDA would like to suggest that the “Machesna Mountain Potential Wilderness Areas” map and the “Fox Mountain Potential Wilderness Area” map (both dated October 4, 2017) serve as boundary maps. Once the areas convert to wilderness, updated final boundary maps and legal descriptions reflecting these additions and the realigned trails would be completed for the Machesna Mountain and the Fox Mountain Wilderness areas.

Sections 5(b)(1) and 5(b)(2) address fire and fuels management, fire funding and agency approval procedures in wilderness areas or wilderness additions designated by this legislation. USDA would like to work with the subcommittee to refine the potential wilderness boundaries to permit possible fuel treatments around the periphery of the boundaries, and better management of the areas. USDA notes that Section 4(d)(1) of the Wilderness Act allows for control of fire, insect, and disease.

Section 5(l) authorizes the installation and maintenance of climatological collection devices in wilderness areas for flood warning and flood control. USDA would like to work with the bill sponsor and the subcommittee to determine if these installations can be located outside the boundary of the wilderness area or if there are alternative areas that can meet the needs and objectives of climatological data collection.

USDA supports the designations in Section 6 of three new wild and scenic rivers (Indian Creek, Mono Creek, and Matilija Creek) as well as the additions to three existing wild and scenic rivers (Sespe Creek, Sisquoc River, and Piru Creek) for a total of 230.8 new miles added to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The Los Padres National Forest has determined that portions of Sespe Creek and Piru Creek are suitable for designation, and has determined that portions of Matilija Creek are eligible for designation. These suitable and eligible segments have been assigned a preliminary classification, and are being managed to protect the river values that provide the basis for their potential inclusion in the National System. USDA would be happy to share more details on this suitability, eligibility, and classification information with the bill sponsor and the subcommittee to facilitate as much consistency as possible between the agency’s findings and the river segments proposed for designation in this bill. While the agency has not found any of the other segments that would be designated by the bill as eligible or suitable, USDA does not oppose any of these wild and scenic river designations. Finally, USDA would like to highlight the challenges of the requirement in Section 3(d) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, which mandates Comprehensive River Management Plans within three years of designation, and suggest exemption from this requirement to align with scheduled revisions of Land and Resource Management Plans.

Section 9 designates the Condor National Recreation Trail. The Department suggests a technical correction to the name of the trail as the appropriate designation under section 5(a) of the National Trails System Act would be a “Scenic” trail designation, rather than a national recreation trail. Recreation trails are generally not designated by Congress, but rather by the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture, whereas under section 5(a) of the National Trails System Act, Congress may designate national scenic and national historic trails. The Department would also like to clarify the intent of the bill sponsor as to whether mechanized equipment and motorized transport will be allowed on the Trail in the non-wilderness segments, including use of mechanical/motorized tools to maintain the trail such as chainsaws.

Section 12(b) would require the Secretary to ensure that Tribes have access to wilderness areas for traditional, cultural, and religious purposes. In carrying out this provision, the Secretary would be authorized, upon request of an Indian tribe, to temporarily close to the general public portions of areas designated by the bill to protect the privacy of tribal traditional cultural and religious activities in the area. USDA understands that implementation of this provision is at the discretion of the Secretary to determine whether the requested closure is appropriate, and that access would be provided to the extent practicable in order to maintain the wilderness character and access for recreation.

This concludes my remarks on the Central Coast Heritage Protection Act. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I would be happy to answer any questions.