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Conservation, Recreation Groups Cheer Washington Lands Bills Poised for House Passage

*Alpine Lakes and Illabot Creek Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers
proposals are part of House-Senate agreement*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, the House Rules Committee posted a package of public lands bills intended to be included as part of the National Defense Authorization Act. A handful of bills in the package are bipartisan bills which protect public lands in Washington State including the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Additions and Pratt and Middle Fork Snoqualmie Rivers Protection Act and the Illabot Creek Wild and Scenic River Act.

“We are elated to see the Alpine Lakes and Illabot proposals for new Wilderness and Wild and Scenic River protections have an opportunity to finally pass Congress.” said Tom Uniack, Conservation Director for Washington Wild. “The patience and leadership of Senator Patty Murray has a real chance to pay off in the waning days of this Congressional session.”

During the current Congressional session, legislation introduced by Congressman Dave Reichert (R-WA08) and Congresswoman Suzan DelBene (D-WA01) received a House hearing and passed the House Natural Resources Committee. Identical legislation introduced by Senator Murray and co-sponsored by Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA) passed the full Senate.

“Senators Murray and Cantwell and Representatives Reichert and DelBene are continuing the bipartisan work that started with the original Alpine Lakes Wilderness designation in 1976,” said Ben Greuel, Washington State Director of The Wilderness Society. “These bills would permanently protect wildlife habitat and places to experience our great outdoors in Seattle’s backyard, strengthening local economies and enhancing quality of life for countless Washingtonians.”

The Alpine Lakes legislation would protect an additional 22,000 acres of wilderness adjoining the existing Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area, and would add 10 miles of the Pratt River and nearly 30 miles of the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. This legislation would protect clean water, native trout and world-class outdoor recreational opportunities in the closest mountain valley to the greater Seattle metropolitan area.

“With the proximity of the Pratt and Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie rivers to the major urban center of Seattle, residents of the region have unparalleled access to an abundance of recreational opportunities on these world-class rivers,” said Tom O’Keefe, Pacific Northwest Stewardship Director for American Whitewater. “As someone who has explored hundreds of river miles across the country and around the world, I can confidently say that we have some of the most spectacular river resources of any place in the world.”

Legislation to designate Illabot Creek as a Wild and Scenic River has garnered support from local elected officials, businesses, sportsmen and adjacent land owners. Wild & Scenic designation would protect stream flows and important spawning habitat for iconic Northwest salmon species in this creek which flows into the

Skagit Wild & Scenic River — a premier recreational destination and highly important watershed for salmon recovery.

“Senators Murray and Cantwell and Representatives Reichert and DelBene's vision to protect three of Puget Sound's best rivers, the Middle Fork Snoqualmie and Pratt Rivers as well as Illabot Creek, on behalf of local communities and outdoor businesses is one step closer to reality today,” said Wendy McDermott, Associate Director of Washington Conservation Programs for American Rivers. “Unbelievably, Washington State only has 200 miles of rivers protected under the Wild and Scenic River Act. These bills represent a renewed commitment to protecting our wild rivers.”

After significant outreach to local stakeholders, the Alpine Lakes legislation was carefully crafted by Congressman Reichert and Senator Murray resulting in strong local support. Both the Alpine Lakes and Illabot bills have garnered endorsements from more than 70 local elected officials, more than 100 outdoor local businesses in the Snoqualmie River Valley and leading members of the outdoor industry, and nearly 150 conservation, recreation, hunting and fishing and religious leaders.

“We appreciate the leadership and commitment of Senator Murray and Representative Reichert as we have worked together to ensure continued mountain bike access to the Middle Fork Snoqualmie Trail while adding lasting protections for the river corridor and the surrounding forests,” said Glenn Glover, Executive Director of the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance. “We are pleased to be part of a proposal that is a win-win for mountain bikers and the environment.”

Just an hour's drive from the Seattle metropolitan area, the Alpine Lakes additions provide meaningful trails and recreational opportunities that appeal to a wide range of residents and visitors alike.

“Some of our most scenic and beloved trails here in Washington are in Wilderness areas and along wild rivers, and we need to protect them so that they are here for the next generation of hikers,” said Andrea Imler, Advocacy Director for Washington Trails Association. “Washington Trails Association's dedicated trail maintenance volunteers give back to trails in the Pratt and Middle Fork Snoqualmie river valleys, including the Pratt Connector, which winds through the Alpine Lakes additions proposal area.”

Recently, 45 local CEOs and executives of Washington-based companies sent a letter to the key House and Senate Committees and the Washington Congressional delegation in support of a handful of public lands bills pending in Congress, including both the Alpine Lakes and Illabot Creek legislation. The letter represented an impressive and powerful collection of executives from around the state including leadership from the Seattle and Kittitas County Chambers of Commerce, The Tri Cities Economic Development Council, the Washington Clean Technology Alliance, Alaska Air Group, Tully's Coffee and many more.

“This letter confirms what we already know: that our Wilderness areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers and public lands here in the Evergreen State matter to businesses, their employees and local communities,” said Martinique Grigg, Executive Director of The Mountaineers. “We look forward to a real opportunity to add to our public lands legacy before the end of the year.”

These bills have been pending in Congress for years but local support for them has been building for decades.

“The Middle Fork Valley is a place I have been working to restore and improve for the last two decades,” said Mark Boyar, President of the MidFORC Coalition and a Jefferson Award Winning activist for his efforts to preserve the Middle Fork Valley. “The Alpine Lakes legislation would add lasting protection to this special place that so many people have volunteered to preserve.”