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AMERICA'S RIVERS

BACKGROUND

Our flowing freshwater ecosystems are our most important - and most seriously neglected - natural resources. Our rivers are the life support systems for the vast majority of natural species and provide as well virtually all of our drinking water needs.

Yet, there is mounting evidence that our river systems are in trouble: One third of all freshwater fish species are threatened or endangered, as are most of our anadromous salmon stocks in the northwest; many other aquatic species essential to the food chain are declining at an alarming rate. Western rivers are over-appropriated and often dewatered for consumptive uses without regard to instream needs for fish and wildlife. The problems stem from pollution and habitat destruction from dams, diversions and development; as a result, aquatic species are in serious decline. Americans deserve and expect healthy river systems to enjoy as well for recreation, for fishing, boating, swimming and wading.

A NATIONAL RIVERS PROGRAM

We need a new national commitment and strong national leadership to protect and restore America's rivers. We must begin by reauthorizing and strengthening the Clean Water Act to protect rivers from non-point sources of pollution, such as urban and agricultural runoff, which are not now regulated, and requiring new biological standards for rivers and streams. Second, we need to develop a national rivers and riparian protection policy that addresses, watershed by watershed, the problems that are degrading our freshwater systems. We can no longer afford to look at rivers in segments, but must instead develop broader, ecosystem-level strategies and plans to protect watersheds. Finally, we need a new national commitment to preserve and protect our remaining wild and scenic rivers and to instill in all Americans a river conservation ethic, a sense of stewardship to preserve rivers for future generations.

SPECIFIC ISSUES/MAJOR EVENTS

I. PROTECTION OF NATIONALLY SIGNIFICANT RIVERS

A. Wild and Scenic Rivers

Twenty-five years after the passage of the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act, over 10,000 miles of pristine and scenic rivers have received permanent protection from adverse development through Congressional action. The Wild and Scenic River System is a national program we can all take pride in; yet it represents less than one half of 1% of the total river miles in this country.

We are moving too slow and should be doing much more to complete this mission. More than 500 rivers on federal lands are eligible for wild and scenic designation and protection, not including scores of pristine rivers in Alaska threatened by mining, logging and other development supported by the Bush administration. A wild and scenic rivers agenda that addresses this backlog of eligible rivers should be a high priority for the next Congress, and is a fitting environmental goal in recognition of the 25th anniversary of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

States with a significant number of rivers eligible for Congressional designation include: Alaska, California, Washington, Montana and Idaho.

B. Alsek - Tatshenshini Rivers (Glacier Bay NP): Senator Gore

In addition, there is a significant international effort underway to protect the Alsek-Tatshenshini rivers in Alaska and Canada, as well as Glacier Bay National Park, from the devastating impacts of one of the world's largest copper mines, to be developed in the Canadian headwaters of the Tatshenshini River.

Senator Gore is one of the leading opponents of the proposed copper mine and has introduced Senate Joint Resolution 290, calling on the US and Canada to join together to preserve this magnificent wilderness from threatened development. This resolution and Senator Gore's leadership are essential to the successful resolving of this issue.

Passage of the resolution would provide a clear, clean and visible environmental achievement. A hearing on House Joint Resolution 460, companion legislation sponsored by Rep. Wayne Owens, is expected in early August.

Note: A Washington press conference should be held with American Rivers and other leading organizations fighting this development at the time of the hearing or, if possible, in conjunction with Senator Gore's testimony.

C. Auburn Dam: Sacramento, California

The American River in northern California is threatened with yet another huge dam; this one a \$700 million to \$1 billion Corp of Engineers project that would destroy

34 miles of critical wildlife habitat and recreational waters. This could be the most expensive dam ever built in this country and, while some flood control for Sacramento is needed, there are cheaper, less damaging alternatives.

House Interior Committee hearings are scheduled for late July. Chairman George Miller is expected to oppose; Senator Cranston's support for the dam has softened to neutral. Senatorial candidate Barbara Boxer opposes both dams, and the Democratic assemblyman from Sacramento, Phil Isenberg, is not supporting the Corps/Fazio proposal. The project is strongly supported by Rep. Fazio (D) and many Sacramento area business interests. An even bigger project (\$2 billion multi-purpose dam) is proposed by Reps. Doolittle and Lehman and Senator Seymour.

All major enviros oppose this dam and the authorizing legislation. Opposition is being led by Friends of the River, a large river conservation organization in California. American Rivers ranked the American River as its 5th most endangered river this year due to this dam threat.

D. The Grand Canyon

The Grand Canyon Protection Act, still pending before Congress, is designed to require the Secretary of the Interior to develop an operating plan for Glen Canyon Dam that permanently protects the ecological, recreational and cultural resources of the Grand Canyon. For years the dam has been operated to provide peaking power for its customers, which requires huge fluctuations in water releases. As a result there has been significant environmental damage in the canyon, including the loss of beaches and riparian vegetation, degradation of the world-class trout fishery below the dam, and serious problems for the recreational (rafting) industry; the erratic river flows have also damaged Native American cultural sites.

The legislation would bring a permanent solution to a long standing problem that is adversely affecting the Colorado River within our premier national park. The bill is in Conference Committee and has bipartisan support. However, an amendment added in the Senate on behalf of power users and utilities would require federal taxpayers to pay for all environmental mitigation and study costs, rather than power users. Environmental groups strongly oppose this amendment.

II. SAVE THE SALMON

The Columbia-Snake River System and Salmon Restoration

Historically, 16 million wild salmon made their way from the Pacific Ocean up the Columbia-Snake River system each year to spawn. At one time, there was 15,000 miles of spawning habitat for runs of chinook, coho, sockeye chum, pink and steelhead salmon. Now, a century after settlement of the northwest, many salmon stocks are extinct and the rest are threatened or endangered; only 300,000 native salmon are left, along with 2 million hatchery-raised fish.

The fate of the salmon is tied to the Columbia-Snake and its tributaries; more specifically, to the existence and operation of the system of hydroelectric dams that impede fish migration upstream, create sluggish reservoirs out of spawning habitat, and slow down or grind up the young salmon trying to move downstream. Indeed, it is estimated that up to 95% of the smolts are lost before they reach the sea.

The Northwest Power Planning Council was established in 1980 to balance fish and wildlife interests with hydropower, irrigation and transportation. However, the salmon have continued to decline - to the point that more drastic measures are needed soon.

A number of organizations, including American Rivers, have filed for listing of some salmon stocks under the Endangered Species Act in order to begin to develop a serious salmon recovery plan. The programs now being developed, to be successful, must allow for safe passage around the dams and protection and restoration of spawning habitat. While there will be some increased costs to power consumers in the northwest from changes in the operations of dams (to allow more water to be released to flush the young salmon to the sea), the added costs are minimal and this power is already heavily subsidized.

Note: American Rivers is planning a major press announcement on the inadequacy of the salmon recovery plan which is being proposed by the Northwest Power Planning Council around mid-August in Portland, Oregon.

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Draft Briefing Paper on Management of Public Rangelands

From: Maitland Sharpe, Izaak Walton League

Date: July 18, 1992

PROBLEM:

Much of the 270 million acres of public rangelands and the associated riparian habitats owned by the people of the United States is in unsatisfactory or declining condition. Those lands are producing forage, yielding and storing water, producing wildlife and fish, supporting recreation, and building stable soils -- in short, performing all of the functions essential for ecosystem health and human uses -- at far less than their potential. As the owners of these rangelands, all Americans suffer from their degraded condition and reduced productivity. But Westerners suffer most, for these lands are their regional birthright, their recreational backyard, and the foundation of local and regional economies across much of the eleven western states.

The federal government has not lived up to its obligation to give these lands effective, active, balanced, multiple-use management over the past half century. Instead, federal management has followed the course of least resistance. The public rangelands been consistently undermanaged, and their managers, the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service, have been chronically underfunded and understaffed.

HISTORY:

During the late 1800s and the first part of the 20th century, the public rangelands were a public commons. Their rich grasses were free for the taking, first-come-first-served, and the range was soon heavily overused by herds of domestic livestock. Years of overgrazing left the ranges badly damaged. On a westwide scale, soils were lost, watersheds degraded, the valuable forage grasses were depleted, robbed of their vigor and displaced by sagebrush, mesquite, and annual weeds. Once abundant wildlife became rare. Livestock grazers became accustomed to an impoverished landscape, came to regard it as normal, and built their economic lives around free use of the spare remaining forage.

Before mid-century, the Congress had taken steps to bring public land grazing under control -- restricting access to public forage by leasing grazing privileges to adjacent landowners. But federal control was resented by ranchers accustomed to a less trammelled existence, and federal management remained a very tenuous ideal over much of the West. Many of the most damaging

grazing practices were gradually stopped, and many declining ranges were stabilized. But the federal presence remained extremely thin; the ranching community remained politically powerful; federal grazing fees remained conveniently low; and many ranges remained overstocked and failed to begin the slow process of recovery.

In recent years, Americans have become more concerned about the state of their environment and more aware of their legacy of public lands. At the same time, western states have experienced a population boom; western economies have shifted from agriculture to manufacturing and services; the west has become urbanized; the wide open spaces have become narrower and more crowded; and public lands have come to be valued more for recreation, watershed values, wildlife, and solitude, and less for the beef and lamb they produce. These shifting public values have clashed with the private values and expectations of the livestock community, triggering a long, loud public debate over the proper management and future direction of the public rangelands.

CURRENT STATUS:

Since 1985, the rangelands debate has focused on the fees charged for livestock grazing of federal forage. But woven tightly into the fabric of that debate are other questions about: the proper balance between livestock grazing and other uses of the rangelands for wildlife, recreation, watersheds, and rehabilitation; the condition and potential of these lands; the economic health of ranching operations and the local communities that depend on them; the fundamental nature of the deal -- the network of obligations and understandings between the federal government and the public land ranchers; the proper level of federal investment in and management presence on these lands; and the relative claims and contrasting visions of traditional, rural users versus newer, largely urban claimants.

Fees for grazing the National Forests and BLM lands now stand at \$1.97 per "animal unit month" (AUM), which is the amount one cow or five sheep eat in a month. The fee is determined through a formula set by Executive Order 12548, issued by President Reagan in 1986. The formula, which emphasizes the grazers' cost of doing business rather than the fair market value of the forage consumed, was first established by Congress, but expired in 1985. The market value of forage in the western states is a subject of hot debate. According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, the 1990 average value was \$8.70 per AUM. An exhaustive appraisal conducted by BLM and the Forest Service for a 1985 report to Congress determined that fair market value fees then averaged more than four times the federal fee. A 1992 BLM/Forest Service study is reported to have found private land fees averaging \$9.66 per AUM.

Environmentalists have charged that the fee structure is a

blatant subsidy to the small percentage of livestock operators who hold federal grazing permits and that it encourages overgrazing of the public ranges. The industry argues that the public/private comparisons are fundamentally flawed, with private ranges commonly providing better forage, better water, more services, and fewer conflicts with other users. Ranchers also protest that they have already paid for the difference in forage prices when they bought the ranch and the permit to graze nearby federal lands.

Under the current formula, grazing fee receipts cover only part of the costs of administering the grazing program on these federal lands. In fiscal 1991, BLM spent approximately \$45 million on range management and range improvements, but took in only about \$19 million in grazing receipts.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

At present, the issue is driven by legislation that passed the House as H.R. 1096, and is currently pending in the Senate. (The bill was the subject of a hearing on July 1, 1992 before the Public Lands Subcommittee of the Energy Committee.) H.R. 1096 would sharply increase grazing fees and also amend BLM's organic act, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), in several ways that would direct BLM to give more weight to environmental concerns during its planning process. The bill has enjoyed strong backing from the environmental/conservation communities. It has been bitterly opposed by the livestock industry and most western members of Congress. The Administration has consistently opposed the bill and supported the current fee formula. The Senate is not expected to take any action on the bill this year. Similar bills have remained bottled-up in the Senate since 1989.

At the recent Senate hearing, however, BLM's Director, Cy Jamison, spoke favorably of an idea to link a fee increase to an incentive system that would offer credits, rebates, or other incentive payment to permittees to encourage better range management on public land grazing allotments. Jamison argued that the incentive-based approach would provide a "win-win" outcome and break the deadlock over grazing fees. A BLM taskforce is currently working to flesh out the proposal; it is not expected to produce a report before the end of the year. The idea of linking fee increases with incentives sprang from the conservation community and is supported by a number of environmentalists active on range issues. The idea has received a tepid, less-than-enthusiastic reception from the livestock community. The original proposal was to combine a substantial fee increase with an offsetting rebate to any permittee who meets the year-by-year management targets for his allotment, as demonstrated by objective, on-the-ground monitoring of range condition and soil stability. It was designed as a way to use the excess value of federal forage as a kind of in-kind payment to cooperating ranchers to foster conservation practices, careful

stewardship, and restoration of degraded public rangelands. In my view, it is an attractive, responsible proposal that is good conservation, fair to all, and sensitive to both environmental values and responsible economic uses of these lands. This incentives proposal could be effectively advocated by the Clinton/Gore campaign. It should not be passively surrendered to an Administration that is likely to distort it, dilute it, and finally abandon it, after the election, in favor of the status quo.

ADMINISTRATION POLICY:

The administration's policy has generally been responsive to the needs and desires of the livestock industry. At the same time, however, the Bush administration has shown a much greater sensitivity to the environmental concerns of hunters, wildlife professionals, anglers, hikers, motorized recreationists, and other than did the Reagan administration. This administration has emphasized partnerships and cooperative showcase projects on-the-ground, and it has announced rather bold targets for improvements in the condition of ranges and riparian areas by late in the 1990s. But in terms of restoration, this administration has shown little interest in substantive changes. As noted above, the administration has consistently opposed the House proposals to increase grazing fees and provide a better balance between livestock and other uses of the public rangelands.

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