

Testimony on H.R. 2806

By Doug England, Chelan County Washington

Before the House National Park Subcommittee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Doug England, Chelan County, Washington Commissioner. Thank you for making this hearing possible and to Congressman Hastings for introducing important legislation for the people of our county. By way of background, Chelan County is nearly 3,000 sq. miles in size and includes 126,140 acres of National Park, 1,284,374 million acres of National Forest, and 20,891 acres of BLM lands. Fully 80% of our county is owned and controlled by the federal government. After adding other State and other Public Lands, only 13% of our land is privately owned. Economically, Chelan County is largely dependent on agriculture and tourism, providing the nation and world with over \$ 2.6 Billion worth of apples, pears, cherries and other tree fruit annually. With a population of just over 70,000, the county's residents share vacation destinations with a dramatic influx of our state's residents who live west of the Cascade Mountains, joined by visitors from all over the world to experience its unique culture and see its beauty. Historically, one of the most special places of all is the Stehekin Valley, in the North Cascades National Park.

Since it became known that this committee would hold this hearing, I have received a surge of calls reflecting frustration about a "deaf-ear" to local resident's pleas for action. Thank you, Congressman Hastings, for listening. The comments my county and I hear are all strikingly similar; "...please restore my memories of the Upper Stehekin Valley, and please allow my children and those not blessed with the time or ability, to share my experience of this beautiful valley..."

Let me draw heavily upon an editorial from the Yakima Herald Republic, written by Scott Sandberry, to tell their story. It tells of a huge photograph of Horseshoe Basin, a breath taking amphitheater of North Cascade peaks, that hung for years in Stehekin. Visitors marveled at the picture then would ask for directions to see for themselves the area once described in a 1960 Sierra Club documentary film as "a crown jewel of America's scenic grandeur."

They don't ask that now. The photograph has been taken down. Locals got tired of having to tell visitors that, unless they were willing to don a backpack for a 30 mile round trip, they could no longer get to Horseshoe Basin. Or, for that matter, to a myriad of other back country destinations, that Stehekin, itself--accessible only by plane, foot or a 51 mile boat ride – had long been a portal.

In the language of the native Indians, Stehekin meant "the way through." But in October 2003, a 500-year flood washed out the Stehekin Valley Road, which a

century earlier had gone nearly to Horseshoe Basin, dead-ending to quote that 1960 film, "in paradise." Now it ends at a rather non-descript stop sign just 13 miles up river at Car Wash Falls.

Now the National Park Service has opted to abandon the road up river from that point, less than 2 miles into the Park and the Steven Mather Wilderness. Without that road, this doorway to heaven is already experiencing a dramatic drop in visitors using local transportation and the few struggling businesses that have found a home here. The firefighting crews have also lost access to fight the catastrophic wildfire they fear will be given birth within the park and roar into their world as a full grown monster.

Maintaining "the way through" requires only common sense. Parallel to the washed out sections, runs the road's original route, safely upslope from the river. Called the "old wagon road", it became part of the Pacific Crest Trail when the Civilian Conservation Corp crews replaced it with the road along the river.

The solution is obvious. For those 2 1/2 miles, simply reroute the main corridor to the "old wagon trail" and trade the Pacific Crest Trail back to the river, where a trail would be far easier to maintain.

Mr. Chairman, What is the National Park's response to our plea? It is a flat out - "No." The Stehekin Valley Road, essentially a 100 foot right of way, is bounded on both sides by the Mather Wilderness, that, according to the National Park, cannot be moved.

Again, the answer is simple - change the law. There would be no net loss of Wilderness, the Pacific Crest Trail users get a more beautiful route; and the one-lane, primitive, summer road is open. It's just common sense. Other National Parks have similar issues and were formed with far less restrictive language. Most environmental protection experts agree that the "old wagon trail" was where the corridor should have been in the first place.

As one 83 year old gentleman put it, "the old road encouraged and enabled visiting and hiking, even by people limited by time or without well-honed physical abilities. It permitted one day access even by the elderly and families. Being there has touched my soul deeply. I yearn for the day when I can access it again."

It has been said that throughout the world there may be no place else quite like Stehekin, but who will know? As one resident put it, "It's like going to Disneyland and only getting to ride the cup and saucer." Stehekin deserves better than that."

Representative Hastings' bill reflects the common sense desires of the people of Washington State. It provides for replacement of the washed-out road and nothing more. It does not take away from the Wilderness experience, it enhances it for thousands who otherwise will never see these lands.

Mr. Chairman, as you listen to environmental groups asking you to oppose this bill because replacing the Stehekin road “breaks precedent”, ask yourself whether bull-headed opposition to common sense solutions isn’t denying the next generation of our children and grand children the same blessings we enjoyed. They too will be asked to defend the Wilderness and wilderness values that today’s environmental groups claim to love. But if they never experience that same wilderness, how can they be expected to defend it.

It should be noted that this wilderness was named after the first Director of the National Park Service, who, and I quote, “encouraged visitation to normally remote units of the system and thereby create a base of public support...with those who had seen...and gained a personal appreciation for them.” It has been proposed that this wilderness be enlarged. How can your committee ask for our support after this insult to Stehekin?

Mr. Chairman, as the people of my county ask for this legislation to be passed, please remember the good-will that such an obvious common sense solution will provide to future would-be wilderness defenders.

Thank you and thank you again Congressman Hastings and members of the Subcommittee for your willingness to listen to our plea for reason.