

Testimony of Martin Saffer, President Pocahontas County Commission

**Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Committee on Natural Resources U.S. House of Representatives**

July 30, 2009

H.R. 3113

To amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to designate a segment of the Elk River in the State of West Virginia for study for potential addition to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, and for other purposes.

Thank you, Chairman Grijalva and Members of the Subcommittee, for this opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 3113, a Bill to study a portion of the Elk River in Pocahontas County, West Virginia for potential inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

At the outset, I want to recognize the important leadership of Congressman Rahall in sponsoring this and many other environmental measures which will have lasting value enriching and protecting the quality of American life and that of West Virginians for decades to come.

As President of the Pocahontas County Commission, I am in a unique position to speak to the importance of this legislation. Our beautiful rural County has been discovered and we are at a cross roads of decision, as other parts of this great United States also find themselves, in arriving at a balanced use of our natural resources which will best serve us into the future.

My first observation to you is that this portion of the Elk River, having its birth in our yet pristine County, is truly a unique environmental resource. Its waters are cold and pure and it is a trout-fisherman's dream. Its banks are free of development and its waters lap a shoreline where beaver and wildlife yet thrive. The Elk is an important part of our beautiful landscape which draws many visitors and tourists who walk in rich forests and wilderness, and canoe and fish unsullied streams and rivers.

Our County has developed a strong tourist industry which weaves together many unparalleled elements unique to our County. The Cranberry Wilderness together with the recent addition of Spice Run Wilderness, the Greenbrier River, spectacular and tranquil State Parks and forests, rolling farms, serve as panoramic backdrops to the National Radio Astronomy Observatory, the Cass Railroad, and Snowshoe Ski Resort. This wealth of resources promises us a healthy and growing economy into the future. However, the one caveat I see is that as a County we must be true stewards to these abundant gifts.

This leading legislation by Chairman Rahall recognizes the importance of stewardship of unique natural resources to insure a prosperous future. Frank Jezioro, the Director of the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, has expressed his support of a detailed study of the Upper Elk River. He hopes that such a study will answer often raised questions and concerns about how any change in designation would impact present landowners and use of their land as well as the role of the State of West Virginia to manage, control and regulate fish and wildlife. As Mr. Jezioro rightly pointed out to me in our recent conversation concerning this bill, "There is no way to put a value on good clean water" which, as he further stated "is a resource central to sustain life". I believe that as time goes on and as our world and country and state becomes more crowded and congested, water will be more valuable than oil.

Additionally, I want to express the support of the Pocahontas County Convention and Visitors Bureau for this legislation. Our County has over one million visitors a year; an extraordinary economic stream for a county of just 9,000 residents. Tourism is a lasting and powerful economic engine and unique resources like the Elk River must not be taken for granted. Our CVB President, Abbey Withrow, has said in a letter of support of this legislation: "With most of our attractions being natural resources it is imperative that we work to protect them." The CVB sees this study as "step towards protecting what is so important in our area."

The simple truth in life is that one can not have his cake and eat it too. There are choices to be made and the best choices result from careful study of the facts before action is taken. On behalf of the Pocahontas County Commission, I urge this Committee to confirm this wise legislative initiative of Chairman Rahall and hope that the United States Congress enacts this legislation which will begin the needed study of this unique national and state resource.

For a healthy and strong America, there are certain basic elements which must be preserved into the future. No civilization can withstand the destruction of its forests or pollution of its rivers and survive intact. The Elk River is a small but significant link in a chain of strength for America. I urge this study of the Elk. Thank you.

Martin V. Saffer, President
Pocahontas County Commission