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UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Congresswoman Betty McCollum
The Mississippi River Trail Study Act (HR 1796)
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands

Thursday April 27, 2006

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss my bill this afternoon. I first introduced this legislation as a member of the Resources Committee. I was very proud to have served on this committee and I am delighted to be back with my friends and former colleagues today.

My goal is to include part or all of the Mississippi River corridor in the National Park System as a means to coordinate the public and private amenities along the river, help preserve its natural treasures and recognize the Mississippi River's historic and cultural value to our country. The first step towards this vision is the Mississippi River Trail Study Act (HR 1796).

HR 1796 authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study examining the feasibility and suitability of including the Mississippi River in our National Trails System. Despite the great significance of the Mississippi River to our country, this would be the first time the corridor is considered for inclusion in the National Park System.

After all, the Mississippi River is America's River. On its journey from Lake Itasca in my state of Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River touches 10 states. It shapes everyday life for more than 11 million Americans living in communities along its banks and contributes enjoyment to the millions of tourists who visit Mississippi River attractions each year.

This river valley has served as a major route for Native American migration, exploration of the West and settlement of the frontier. My city of St. Paul would not exist without the River. It was founded to serve as a major link in the transportation of people and goods because of its location at the upper end of the navigable river.

The Mississippi River quickly became our country's main natural artery of commerce and continues to be a "working river" today. Barges move grain, oil, steel, paper, coffee, coal and many other raw materials and finished products. When New Orleans and other ports were closed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, we were reminded of how reliant our economy still is on the river.

One of the Mississippi River's newest industries is also among its fastest growing – tourism. Visitors are drawn to the hundreds of natural, cultural and commercial amenities that dot the Mississippi corridor. You may be surprised to learn that the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge, which stretches for 260 miles along the banks of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois, received 1 million more visits last year than Yellowstone National Park.

The Mississippi River Trail Study Act is supported by state and local groups who are looking to the federal government to become an equal partner in the future of the Mississippi River corridor. It is time for Congress to call upon the Park Service to evaluate the role of the federal government in the corridor with a Special Resource Study.

The current language of HR 1796 refers to a "trail study." But, like the Mississippi River itself, the legislative process is dynamic. After reaching out to the National Park Service I learned that a Special Resource Study would be the preferred option and am pleased to accept the proposed changes from the Park Service.

A Special Resource Study will determine the best way to preserve, commemorate and interpret the Mississippi River corridor as a unique piece of American heritage. The flexibility and broad scope of inquiry that a special resource study offers is well suited for the large geography and unique mix of assets within the corridor.

The most appropriate role for the federal government and the specific designation for the corridor will begin to be made clear by the study. However, I feel strongly that consideration of these questions is long overdue. Other national areas such as the Lincoln Highway and the Chesapeake Bay have recently been granted Special Resource Studies by Congress. The significant natural, historic, cultural and economic value of the Mississippi River to the United States argues for equal commitment and focus.

I recognize that the National Park Service is working with an increasingly constrained budget. HR 1796 acknowledges the high demand for Park Service resources by specifically requiring that all completed and ongoing studies on the scenic or historical importance of the Mississippi River be utilized to complete the study.

In addition, multi-state organizations working within the corridor such as the Mississippi River Parkway Commission, the Mississippi River Trail Corporation and Audubon Minnesota have all offered to help the National Park Service complete the study by contributing data, state and local contacts and other tangible forms of assistance. National Park staff indicated that such cooperation from multi-state groups would further reduce costs and the time required to complete the study.

I do not intend for this study to in any way interfere with the essential economic activities on the River or the property rights of those living along the River. The National Park Service can confirm that the activities authorized by the study in this legislation do not even include the possibility of land acquisition.

Instead, I am looking to HR 1796 to create an inventory of the activities and amenities within the Mississippi River corridor that does not exist today. This inventory would produce valuable economic data, including specific numbers of tourists visiting the Mississippi River each year and an accounting of the dollars they bring to our states and communities.

The study is also important because it would make clear that the federal government is a full partner with state and local groups who are working to develop, preserve and enhance the amenities along the Mississippi River corridor.

In the past, the Mississippi River has been a powerful storyline in America's narrative. Today the river continues to shape our identity and strengthen our economy. The Mississippi River is a national treasure that, at the very least, deserves consideration by this Committee and this Congress.

Mr. Chairman, I also have two letters of support for the bill that I would like to submit for the record.

Thank you again for your willingness to hear my bill.