

STATEMENT BY REP. KEN HECHLER, (D-W. Va.), BEFORE THE SUB-COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS, HOUSE INTERIOR COMMITTEE

April 2, 1974

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today in support of my bill, H. R. 2000, to designate 28 outstanding areas in our eastern national forests as wilderness areas. This legislation aims to create the truly national system of wilderness areas envisioned in the original Wilderness Act of 1964. This legislation will offer the benefits of wilderness to people in all sections of the nation, including those sections with the greatest concentrations of population. Citizens in the East have waited nearly a decade to see wilderness protection extended to the unique unspoiled lands in our eastern national forests. Only three areas, the Great Gulf Wilderness in New Hampshire and Linville Gorge and the Shining Rock Wilderness in North Carolina, totalling a paltry 26,477 acres, have been classified as wilderness in the eastern national forests while more than 10 million acres have been set aside in the national forests of the west. H. R. 2000 promises to correct this imbalance through a comprehensive effort to preserve all of the major eastern wilderness areas.

My particular interest, of course, lies in the protection of four areas in the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia: Dolly Sods, Otter Creek, Cranberry Backcountry and Laurel Fork. West Virginians have fought hard for the preservation of these remaining wilderness areas of our State and thus actively support the legislation now before this Subcommittee. West Virginia, like virtually all of the other eastern states, has no lands presently included under the Wilderness Act. After years of trying to move an unresponsive Forest Service, citizen groups and individuals decided their only recourse was to go over the heads of the agency and request Congress to pass legislation to protect these fast-disappearing wilderness areas. As a result of such appeals, I first introduced legislation in the 91st Congress to protect three areas in West Virginia: Dolly Sods, Otter Creek, and the Cranberry Backcountry. Last fall, the fourth area, Laurel Fork, on the West Virginia-Virginia border, was added. These wilderness havens, comprising more than 78,000 acres in the Monongahela National Forest and the neighboring George Washington National Forest, are

truly special areas. Each stands out because of its own unique nature, and each offers the visitor an opportunity to enjoy/scenery and vegetation in a primeval setting. Wilderness designation will protect the twisting course followed by Otter Creek as it rushes and tumbles down through a beautiful remote canyon as well as preserving the upland bogs and windswept plains of Dolly Sods, an area strikingly similar in nature and climate to areas of northern Canada. H. R. 2000 will insure that future generations can experience the joy of hiking in the dense hardwood forests and along the beautiful streams that are found in the Laurel Fork and Cranberry Backcountry areas. The unusual cranberry glades, a scientific and scenic paradise which gives the Backcountry its name, will also be protected. (I have attached an appendix to my written testimony which will provide the Subcommittee with more detailed information on these four areas and I request that this be made a part of the record.)

These irreplaceable lands have been gravely threatened in the last several years by the ravages of mining, logging and roadbuilding which have destroyed neighboring areas in the Monongahela National Forest. Fortunately, to date, the imprint of exploitation has not scarred these lands, but the threat continues to hang over this priceless acreage. The pattern of precious lands imperilled by the bulldozers and power saws of the exploiters is repeated throughout the eastern United States. The Wilderness Act is the only refuge for protection. Bolstered by the decision in U. S. District Court in Minneapolis prohibiting mineral development in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, wilderness designation can near-complete protection from both mineral exploitation and timber harvesting.

In addition to considering my bill, H. R. 2000, and several similar bills, this Subcommittee also has before it two bills which have received considerable interest. I refer to H. R. 10469, the version drafted by the Forest Service, and H. R. 13455, the version which was recommended by the Senate Interior Committee. I want to comment briefly on these bills as they relate to the four West Virginia areas. First, both bills set up two categories to deal with wilderness: the so-called "instant wilderness" category and the wilderness study category. I think the rationale behind this system is sound and I very much favor the full protective

management given to areas placed in the study category. However, I feel that all four West Virginia areas should be placed in the "instant" category. H. R. 13455 confers instant wilderness status on Dolly Sods and Otter Creek but leaves the Cranberry Backcountry in the study category. The bill drops Laurel Fork completely. I think this is a serious error, particularly in light of the fact that much of Laurel Fork has been managed as an undeclared wilderness for many years. The logging interests who have hungrily eyed the prize timber in Laurel Fork seem to have won the early skirmish in the Senate. This is a sad commentary indeed when you realize that Laurel Fork's 11,656 acres represents less than one third of one percent of the 3,441,576 total acres available for logging in the Monongahela and George Washington National Forests.

To its credit, the Forest Service bill, H. R. 10469, confers instant wilderness designation on Laurel Fork. Unfortunately, it cuts the recommended acreage back from 11,656 acres to 8,300 acres. Like H. R. 13455 and H. R. 2000, the Forest Service bill grants wilderness status to Dolly Sods. It places Otter Creek and the Cranberry Backcountry in the study category. The Forest Service version once again cuts back on the recommended acreages: in Otter Creek from 20,000 acres (H. R. 2000 and H. R. 13455) to 18,000 acres, and in the Backcountry from 36,300 acres (H. R. 2000 and H. R. 13455) to 13,200 acres. The latter cutback is rather curious since the Monongahela National Forest Supervisors have managed the Backcountry as a de facto roadless wilderness area for several decades.

Both the Senate bill and the Forest Service version attempt to amend the 1964 Wilderness Act in three very significant areas: mineral development, condemnation, and grazing. The Senate language appears markedly superior, particularly in regard to the condemnation powers. I strongly support these amendments contained in Sections 7(c), 7(d) and 7(e) of H. R. 13455. I would also urge the Subcommittee to consider going further in the area of controls on mineral development. Mining should be completely prohibited in wilderness areas because it is fundamentally incompatible with the concept of wilderness management. Coal mining poses perhaps the gravest threat to the unique scenic

values that wilderness designation is supposed to protect. Section 7(c) of H. R. 13455 is a good first step, but it has comparatively little effect in the East since it would have no impact on mining operations on lands where the Federal Government does not own the mineral rights. Most eastern national forests lands are acquired lands; in many cases the minerals were severed from the surface estate at the time of Federal purchase.

The Forest Service bill differs from my bill and from the Senate version in one further major respect. Although the Forest Service seems to have finally recognized the value of the unique unspoiled areas in our eastern national forests, the agency still clings to its own narrow, purist interpretation of the 1964 Wilderness Act defining wilderness as an area where the imprint of man has not been felt. This definition has stymied efforts to gain wilderness protection for eastern areas for nearly a decade. In line with this definition, Section 4 of H. R. 10469 would amend the 1964 Act to create a special definition for eastern wilderness. This redefinition is totally unnecessary--the original Act clearly defines wilderness in Section 2(c)(1) as an area where "the imprint of man's work (is) substantially unnoticeable." Since the Forest Service has finally conceded the fact that these areas deserve protection, why does it persist in the hassle over definitions? The answer came through in last year's Senate wilderness hearings and in Chief McGuire's testimony before this Subcommittee last Tuesday. Chief McGuire stated: "A broad interpretation of the definition of wilderness by Congress would imply that 'restored' areas in the West also warrant consideration as wilderness.... vast areas of the West, with high resource values and opportunities, will be involved." Clearly, the Forest Service with its usual preoccupation with timber harvesting fears that Congress will take away prize timber producing acreage.

In summary, the crucial point is that Congress has the right and the obligation to decide what is and what is not wilderness. We do not need any more squabbles over definitions--what we need is action to designate wilderness areas close to our large East Coast population centers. The East cries out for wilderness--here where the rush and bustle of Twentieth Century society reaches its dizziest pace, places of solitude and natural unspoiled beauty are desperately needed.