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Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

June 20, 2007

The Honorable Dirk Kempthorne
Secretary
United States Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Kempthorne:

As the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) works to finalize the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Hanford Reach National Monument, I write to urge you to support public access and recreational opportunities wherever possible, consistent with the protection of the cultural and natural resources of the area.

As you know, the CCP will provide the framework for managing this significant stretch of the Columbia River for 15 years or more. It is unfortunate that monument designations under the Antiquities Act – unlike other forms of federal resource protection – leave little flexibility for land managers. Nevertheless, I appreciate the work the USFWS has done to solicit and respond to the views of the public in the development of this plan.

I remind you that Benton, Franklin and Grant counties, along with many other local government entities, invested tremendous time and effort to plan for the management of this area – long before the designation of Hanford Reach as a national monument. I encourage you to fully account for the many specific issues and suggestions raised by the local county governments during the public comment period. In addition, the USFWS should make clear how local government and other local groups will be incorporated in the ongoing planning and management of the monument.

In general, I urge USFWS to implement management options that accommodate public access to the area to the maximum extent practicable. I recognize that there are areas susceptible to vandalism and invasive weeds that must be protected for future generations. I am also aware that budgetary constraints may limit some of the options available to the agency. However, there should also be recognition that much of the surrounding area of Central Washington is already under some form of federal land management where hunting and recreational uses such as horseback riding are often restricted. Before you finalize the CCP, I want to express my views about four specific issues, all of which fall in the general subject area of public access.

Specifically, I believe the USFWS should provide for enhanced public access to the top of Rattlesnake Mountain, which offers unparalleled views of the entire monument. The area has also long been the site of an observatory, which houses the largest and most powerful optical telescope in Washington state. I recognize the challenges the agency would face due to the inadequacies of the existing road to the summit. However, I believe the agency should give serious consideration to all options that would result in greater public access to the site, including improving the road.

Another issue of concern is the potential closure of the White Bluffs boat launch. This is an important point of entry for many recreational river users. Without this boat launch there would be a 30 mile stretch of river without an access point. I am concerned about the potential safety issues that would be created without the White Bluffs boat launch and I strongly urge you to retain and improve this site.

Thirdly, I urge you to leave the door open to a possible Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife licensed controlled hunt program for elk on the Arid Lands Ecology reserve (ALE). I am aware that some landowners in the area are concerned about potential trespassing problems and the possibility that elk could be driven onto area highways or deeper into the Hanford site. In addition, there are liability issues that would first have to be addressed. Nonetheless, it may be possible to resolve these issues within the 15 year timeframe of this management plan. In that case, the CCP should be flexible enough to allow consideration of a limited public controlled hunt program on the ALE as one option to reduce elk numbers to a sustainable level.

Finally, with respect to the six islands that are currently part of the McNary Wildlife Refuge and that will be part of the monument in the future, I urge you to keep those islands open to reasonable public use and to consider sanctioning limited hunting opportunities above the high water mark. I would note that most of the other islands in the area are already off limits to the public, leaving few recreational experiences of this type for area visitors.

In addition, I remind you that the monument proclamation signed by President Clinton referenced protecting state and tribal rights and other valid existing rights as well as facilities associated with the Columbia Basin Project and the Federal Columbia River Transmission System.

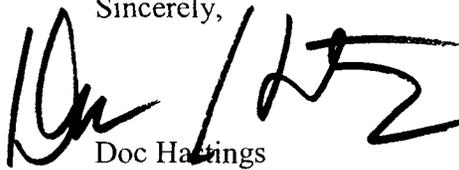
Over the last several decades, federal land policy in general has become ever more restrictive. Once recreational activities are no longer permitted or areas are closed to the public, they tend to remain that way. It has been extremely unusual for public lands that were once closed by the federal government to later be reopened. However, that is the rare circumstance presented with the Hanford Reach area, which had been closed for decades to protect the security of the nuclear site.

The Honorable Dirk Kempthorne
June 20, 2007
Page Three

The decisions made under the CCP will guide the management of this special area for many years to come. The interests and needs of the surrounding communities will no doubt change over this time as well. I urge you to make certain that this plan is responsive to the concerns of the surrounding communities on an ongoing basis, and that this plan makes public access a priority while ensuring the protection of the area for future generations.

Thank you for your attention to my concerns. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Doc Hastings', written over a horizontal line.

Doc Hastings
Member of Congress

cc: Mr. Greg Hughes, Hanford Reach National Monument Project Leader