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## Testimony of Dean Finnerty, Trout Unlimited

In support of

**H.R. 980, Southwestern Oregon Watershed Salmon Protection Act (SOWSPA) of 2021**

Before the

**House Natural Resources Committee**

**Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands**

**Legislative hearing - November 9, 2021**

Thank you, Chair Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and members of the Subcommittee for inviting me to testify today. I'm honored to be asked to testify on behalf of Trout Unlimited and in support of the Southwestern Oregon Watershed and Salmon Protection Act (SOWSPA) of 2021.

My name is Dean Finnerty, and I am currently employed as the northwest regional director for Trout Unlimited's Angler Conservation Project where my job is largely focused on protecting salmon and steelhead habitat across five western states. Previously, I served 26 years in law enforcement and operated a fishing and hunting guide business in southwest Oregon that employed two of my five sons as well as other licensed guides.

Founded in 1959, Trout Unlimited today has more than 340,000 members and supporters across the country. We are dedicated to bringing together diverse interests to care for and recover rivers and streams so our children and grandchildren can experience the joy of wild trout, salmon, and steelhead.

Currently, wild trout, salmon and steelhead stocks are in precipitous decline in almost all the Western watersheds to which they are native. We are in a desperate race against the impacts warming climate and other pressures. We simply must do more to safeguard our last best salmon and steelhead strongholds.

That's why the Southwestern Oregon Watersheds and Salmon Protection Act is so important and timely. This bill makes permanent an existing administrative mineral withdrawal that was put in place to protect certain headwater areas from proposed industrial-scale strip mining and to allow time for Congress to pass permanent protections. The existing Administrative withdrawal is set to expire in 2036. This bill would protect these critical areas from this type of development while still allowing hunting, fishing, rafting, kayaking, camping, enjoying the forest road system and other outdoor recreational activities.

These protections are critical to safeguard the headwaters of world-famous salmon, trout and steelhead streams - including the Rogue and Smith Rivers and lesser known, but equally important streams such as

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**A mission to bring together diverse interests to care for and recover rivers and streams so our children can experience the joy of wild and native trout and salmon.**

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Hunter Creek and Pistol River. The rivers and streams that will be protected by this legislation provide exceptional fishing for salmon, steelhead and trout, as well as drinking water to tens of thousands of residents of southwest Oregon and northwest California. They are also home to many native fish species, including Chinook salmon, steelhead, Coastal Cutthroat trout, and three listed (threatened) fish species, including the Southern Oregon Northern California Coast (SONCC) Coho salmon, the Southern Distinct Population Segment (DPS) of Pacific eulachon, and the Southern DPS of green sturgeon. This area also boasts the highest concentration of rare plants in Oregon, and nine U.S Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Botanical Areas, or Areas of Critical Environmental Concern — it is one of only a few places in the world where unique carnivorous pitcher plants grow alongside rivers!

The importance of this region as a salmon and steelhead stronghold is widely known. That was a major factor in the Department of Interior’s proposal in 2015 to withdraw some 101,000 acres of the Siskiyou National Forest and the Medford and Coos Bay Districts of the BLM – the same geography as this legislation - from mineral extraction, subject to valid existing rights.

After full NEPA analyses and overwhelming public support (of the more than 45,000 public comments received by the Forest Service and BLM on this proposal, 99 percent were in support), the Assistant Secretary for Lands and Minerals authorized a 20-year withdrawal, commonly known as the “Southwestern Oregon Mineral Withdrawal,” which took effect on December 30, 2016.

Bipartisan support for the Administrative withdrawal – and for permanent protections as provided by SOWSPA - includes endorsements from cities, counties and water districts, tribes, businesses, state agencies and elected officials in both Oregon and California, plus local, regional, and national conservation, and sporting groups.

But the 20-year withdrawal is only a temporary safeguard for the amazing salmon and steelhead waters of the Smith River and neighboring stream systems. The Administrative withdrawal was intended as a temporary safeguard, put into place to protect the area while Congress worked to pass permanent protection for this area – which SOWSPA would accomplish. Now it’s time for Congress to provide permanent protection for these irreplaceable resources, and to bolster local economies and communities dependent on fishing and water-based outdoor recreation.

As a long-time guide, I know that people come from all over the world to fish the rivers of the southwest Oregon coast (known as the Wild Rivers Coast), especially the Rogue and Chetco Rivers and their estuaries. It’s impossible to overstate the importance this “economic engine” provides to the hundreds of shop owners, hotels, restaurants, guides, and gas station owners who live, work, and raise their families in this region. Fishing generates more than \$25 million in economic activity each year for the Wild Rivers Coast and, across Oregon, sportfishing delivers \$2.5 billion annually to the state’s economy.

In recent years, hotter and drier conditions associated with climate change have so severely degraded Oregon’s salmon and steelhead streams that for the first time in history the legendary fisheries of the North Umpqua and Deschutes rivers were completely closed to angling this year for native species such as summer steelhead. The importance of protecting clean, cold water in this region is critical to helping

native salmon and steelhead runs maximize their natural resilience; given the economic, cultural, and ecological importance of these species, we must use every tool at our disposal to sustain them in this region.

These streams are far more valuable for the clean drinking water, sustainable fisheries, and recreation opportunities they provide than for mineral extraction. A BLM analysis in 2015 concluded that mineral potential in this area was low — owing to low grade ore and small dispersed deposits. Despite this fact, mining interests continued to explore options for extraction at a scale that would be profitable. These interests have undertaken repeated exploration in this region, causing a drain of resources from agencies tasked with reviewing these applications and creating uncertainty for communities and businesses that rely on the clean water and healthy fisheries. This legislation would provide certainty for all by permanently protecting this area from industrial mining.

TU believes that our country must have a comprehensive strategy for securing raw materials for energy technologies in ways that don't compromise important fish and wildlife habitat and local economies dependent on outdoor recreation. To be clear, we are not categorically opposed to mining, including on public lands. However, mining is not appropriate in all locations, and is simply incompatible with other priorities in certain areas, including conservation of wild salmon and steelhead and protection of key sources of drinking water for downstream communities and businesses.

The lands and waters that would be better protected by SOWSPA are among these special places. As climate change and human development continue to cause widespread adverse impacts to wild salmon and steelhead stocks, states and the federal government have spent millions of dollars over the past two decades to restore salmon habitat in our region. It makes no sense to allow strip mining operations in the very habitat areas where we have made these conservation investments.

In closing, passage of the Southwestern Oregon Watershed and Salmon Protection Act of 2021 (H.R. 980) should be a priority for passage in this Congress. I was pleased to see the bill advance as part of the Protecting Americas Wilderness Act earlier this Congress and urge the Committee to advance the stand-alone bill to further support opportunity for passage through the legislative process and into law. This bill is timely, necessary, and has been built by Rep. DeFazio from years of feedback from local communities, scientists, and conservation and fishing groups. This legislation honors and would sustain the rugged outdoor heritage of southwest Oregon and northwest California, and the dependence of communities in this region on fishing, hunting and outdoor recreation. It also honors the many years that professional guides like me and the angling community have invested in working to conserve the waters and fisheries here so that we can continue to share them with visitors from around the world.

I thank the Committee for considering this legislation and for inviting me to testify in support. I also want to thank Congressman Peter DeFazio personally for his steadfast and passionate leadership for protecting one of Oregon's greatest treasures. I strongly urge you to advance this bill.