



Testimony of Dean Finnerty, Trout Unlimited

In support of H.R. 7509, Wild Rogue Conservation and Recreation Enhancement Act

Before the

House Natural Resources Committee

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

Legislative hearing – June 23, 2022

Thank you, Chair Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and members of the Subcommittee for inviting me to testify today. I'm honored to speak on behalf of Trout Unlimited in support of H.R. 7509, The Wild Rogue Conservation and Recreation Enhancement Act of 2022.

Founded in 1959, Trout Unlimited today has more than 340,000 members and supporters across the country, with 3,400 members organized into nine chapters in Oregon. 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.

I am the northwest regional director for TU's Angler Conservation Project, which is focused on better protecting salmon and steelhead habitat across five western states. Previously, I served 26 years in law enforcement and owned and operated a small business as a fishing and hunting guide in southwest Oregon. Over the years my guide business employed two of my five sons as well as other licensed guides. And one of my go-to waters for my clients to catch some of Oregon's famous steelhead and salmon has been the Rogue River, which is renowned around the world for its fishing, especially for summer steelhead.

Unfortunately, wild trout, salmon and steelhead stocks are in precipitous decline in many of the Western watersheds to which they are native. We are in a desperate race against the impacts of a warming climate and other factors contributing to their downward trend. We simply must do more to safeguard our last, best salmon and steelhead strongholds — especially if we want to sustain the rural economies, communities, and lifestyle their fisheries have supported in southwest Oregon and other parts of the West dependent on river-based resources.

Visitors from around the world come to my backyard to enjoy the Rogue River's outstanding fishing opportunities and technical white-water rapids (often run in wooden drift boats like early visitors such as author Zane Grey did in the 1920s). These visitors can enjoy multi-day trips through the canyon and

stay in historic lodges, view wildlife such as black bears and black-tailed deer, and take in breathtaking scenery including rugged mountains covered in majestic old growth Douglas Fir. The Rogue River between Grants Pass and Foster Bar is so incredibly beautiful and wild, I wish every American could experience it with friends and family. It's the kind of experience that makes folks feel more connected to their country – and prouder of it.

That's a primary reason why H.R. 7509, the Wild Rogue Conservation and Recreation Enhancement Act, is important. This bill will better protect an area that is vital to Oregon's rural economy by increasing protections and improving management for specific BLM-managed public lands. The bill would extend the existing Wild Rogue Wilderness upstream to include the first section of a highly scenic and popular river reach and would designate the Rogue Canyon Recreation Area. These designations will provide clearer management guidance for this truly unique resource-area and its fisheries, help protect water quality, coldwater habitats, watershed ecology, and the region's cherished salmon and steelhead runs, and enhance and better conserve the nationally significant recreational opportunities in and around this remarkable river.

This legislation has been crafted in a collaborative and common-sense way that will help conserve the qualities that make the Rogue such a great destination for hunters and anglers, whitewater enthusiasts, campers and other outdoor recreationists. Moreover, the bill will ensure that this irreplaceable natural resource continues to support small commercial operators of river-based services.

As we all know, uncharacteristic wildfire has become an increasingly common threat in the West to people's homes, health, livelihoods, and to our coldwater fisheries. For this reason, I want to highlight how this bill addresses wildfire concerns in the Rogue basin. This bill will require federal resource management agencies to complete a wildfire risk assessment and develop a wildfire mitigation plan which will include vegetation treatments, evacuation routes, and temporary roads that may be necessary to carry out the mitigation plan. Nothing in this bill alters or undermines the agencies' ability to manage for wildfire.

It is also worth noting that this bill will not negatively impact mining. Valid existing mineral rights would be preserved, there are no current mining operations, and United States Geological Survey data shows that there are no critical mineral deposits, in the area contemplated under this legislation.

I also call your attention to the importance of the Rogue River as a salmon and steelhead stronghold. While many salmon and steelhead fisheries in southern Oregon and other West Coast states are now severely restricted or even curtailed due to declining populations of these iconic fishes, the Rogue's fisheries are still in relatively good shape. As a long-time guide, I know that people come from all over the world to fish the rivers of the southwest Oregon coast, especially the Rogue River and its estuary. This economic engine supports hundreds of shop owners, hotels, restaurants, local guides, and gas station owners who live, work, and raise their families in this region. Statewide, fishing, hunting and wildlife viewing generate \$2.5 billion annually. As of 2008, travel-related expenditures generated some \$160 million a year in Curry, Josephine and Jackson Counties. I know from my guiding that those

numbers likely grew until the COVID-19 pandemic set in. Locally, business dependent on fishing, hunting and river-based recreation has been slowly coming back in recent months. We must do all we can to support this hopeful trend.

There is no sporting opportunity without productive habitat, and some of our country's best habitat for fish and game species is found in designated Wilderness and Wild and Scenic River areas, where fishing and hunting are expressly allowed. This bill's wilderness expansion component will protect some 60 miles of rivers and streams that serve as spawning habitat for many native fish species, including Chinook salmon, steelhead, Coastal Cutthroat trout, and the threatened Southern Oregon-Northern California Coast Coho salmon.

This bill is timely, necessary, and has been built by Congressman DeFazio based on years of engagement with and feedback from local communities, scientists, and conservation and fishing groups. It honors and would sustain the rugged outdoor heritage of southwest Oregon 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 protect and restore the waters and fisheries here so that we can continue to share them with visitors from around the world. We have to conserve the best of what we have left, habitat-wise, and the Rogue is one of these last, best waters in the West for salmon and steelhead.

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 in conserving the Rogue River — one of Oregon's greatest natural treasures and an economic cornerstone of this region. As a conservative conservationist and a life-long sportsman and licensed guide, I strongly urge you to advance this bill.