



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

Watershed Restoration in Washington State

**Statement of Michael Anderson, Senior Resource Analyst for
The Wilderness Society, Pacific Northwest Region**

**Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies**

Public Witness Day on Non-Tribal Issues

April 19, 2007

Introduction

Thank you, Chairman Dicks and members of the committee, for this opportunity to speak before you. I am testifying today in support of two proposals for watershed restoration in Washington State – one for the Skokomish River Watershed on the Olympic Peninsula, and the other for national forest watersheds throughout the Puget Sound and Hood Canal Basin (including the Skokomish). Both proposals deal with a common theme – the impacts of old Forest Service roads on water quality, flooding, and fish habitat. The current poor health of Hood Canal demonstrates how sensitive the waters of Puget Sound are to such impacts. The proposals request funding for the U.S. Forest Service in FY 2008 to fix road problems and improve watershed conditions through appropriations of (a) \$4.6 million in the Skokomish Watershed and (b) \$30 million in the Puget Sound/Hood Canal Basin.

Mr. Chairman, The Wilderness Society and our colleagues in the Pacific Northwest appreciate the important role you have played in watershed restoration and salmon recovery over the years. More than a decade ago, we remember that you convened a conference in Tacoma with Vice President Gore focusing on the watershed restoration goals of the Northwest Forest Plan. We also remember that you helped to secure funding that enabled the Forest Service to fix and replace hundreds of old road culverts that were blocking fish migration. In the Skokomish Watershed alone, approximately \$10 million were invested in restoration work in the 1990s, resulting in the decommissioning of 100 miles of old roads. We sincerely want to thank you again for all those efforts you have made to help restore the region's watersheds and salmon habitat.

Skokomish Watershed Action Team

The Skokomish River Watershed in the southeast corner of the Olympic Peninsula exemplifies many of the challenges and opportunities in fixing roads and restoring watershed health. The Skokomish River is the largest source of freshwater in the southern end of Hood Canal. It is notorious as the most frequently flooded river in Washington State. It is also one of the most heavily logged and roaded national forest

watersheds in the Pacific Northwest, due to accelerated timber production after World War II. Excessive sediment and gravel have washed down from roads, ditches, and culverts in the upper watershed's steep slopes and deposited in the river channel that runs through the flat and fertile Skokomish Valley. Consequently, the river overflows its banks much more frequently and floods the valley's farm lands and homes, including the Skokomish Indian Reservation near the mouth of the river. Furthermore, in recent years portions of the river have gone completely dry by late summer, blocking all salmon migration into the upper watershed during spawning season.

Recognizing the dire condition of the watershed, a diverse partnership quickly came together in 2005 to form the Skokomish Watershed Action Team (SWAT). The SWAT includes representatives from more than 20 organizations, including the Skokomish Tribe, Mason County, state and federal regulatory agencies, conservation groups, and the timber industry. The Olympic National Forest staff participates in an ex-officio capacity and has been very cooperative in providing technical information and logistical assistance to the group. Mr. Chairman, we are very grateful for the regular involvement, assistance, and encouragement provided by your deputy district director Sara Crumb.

The SWAT works together to promote and implement appropriate restoration projects in the Skokomish Watershed. While our primary focus is on projects in the upper watershed on Forest Service lands, we also share information and provide mutual support for restoration work throughout the watershed. I am pleased to say that the SWAT has been remarkably successful in fostering cooperation and coordinated action in the Skokomish. One sign of our success has been to raise more than \$2 million for restoration work in the watershed, including \$250,000 generated last year through timber sale receipts from the Flat Stewardship Project.

This winter, the SWAT reached another milestone when it produced a detailed three-year action plan and funding strategy to restore the Skokomish Watershed. For the upper watershed, based on information provided by the Forest Service at the SWAT's request, the plan identifies a total of \$17.8 million of projects, with a need for federal funds totaling \$15.5 million. On the basis of our three-year action plan, the SWAT has submitted an appropriations request of \$4.6 million for the Forest Service in fiscal year 2008.

The three-year plan's upper watershed actions will improve water quality and flows, promote recovery of endangered salmon and bull trout, and reduce flooding impacts, primarily through implementation of road treatments such as decommissioning, stabilization and drainage upgrades, and culvert replacements. The watershed restoration work will benefit the Skokomish Tribe and other residents of the lower watershed whose homes and livelihoods have been so devastated by the frequent winter flooding.

In the lower watershed, the SWAT's plan identifies projects totaling \$24.5 million, along with \$1.73 million to complete the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' General Investigation

of the Skokomish River Basin.¹ The SWAT recognizes that implementation of these restoration projects will require funding from a variety of sources. Accordingly, the three-year plan includes a Capital Improvement Program and funding strategy for Skokomish Watershed restoration that identifies 25 separate sources of financial support. However, most of these funding sources are only available for projects in the lower watershed and estuary. Restoration of the upper watershed will likely have to rely predominantly on Forest Service funding.

Washington State Watershed Restoration Initiative

While the Skokomish is a dramatic example of watershed restoration needs and collaboration, many other Pacific Northwest watersheds are also in serious need of help. Unfortunately, federal funding to fix roads and restore watersheds has greatly diminished in recent years. Currently in Washington State, the federal budget provides only \$3 million annually for Forest Service road maintenance, allowing the maintenance backlog to grow by at least \$8 million each year. Inadequate maintenance is largely to blame for more than \$30 million of road damage in Washington's national forests following heavy rains last November. According to the Forest Service, if the needed road work begins now, it will cost an estimated \$300 million to bring Washington's national forests into compliance with today's standards.

What should be done about the roads problem? A coalition including the Washington State Department of Ecology, Department of Fish and Wildlife, and 11 conservation groups has prepared a "Watershed Restoration Initiative" for the state's national forests. Our coalition is suggesting the following 6-step solution.

First, the federal government should significantly increase funding to fix Forest Service roads. Wiping out the Forest Service road maintenance backlog in the next decade state-wide will cost about \$30 million annually. We think it makes sense initially to prioritize the national forests watersheds that flow into the already ailing Puget Sound and Hood Canal Basin – i.e. the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest and the eastern Olympic National Forest. We believe we must pay attention to the top of the watersheds if we are going to heal Puget Sound and Hood Canal.

Second, the Forest Service and its restoration partners should pick watersheds where road work will deliver the biggest bang for the buck. These are areas with threatened or endangered fish, sensitive geologies, partnership opportunities, and complementary restoration projects occurring elsewhere in the watershed. Within the priority watersheds, we are encouraging restoration projects to emphasize --

- re-routing road runoff to eliminate or reduce direct delivery of sediment to streams;
- decommissioning high-risk, unstable, and unneeded roads;
- improving fish passage;

¹ The Mason Conservation District, Skokomish Tribe, and Mason County have submitted a separate appropriations request for the Skokomish General Investigation.

- renovating road drainage features to minimize future maintenance and risk of road failures.

Third, the Initiative calls for improved inventories of road systems so we are able to use sound, field-based information to make road management decisions. Fortunately, the Forest Service has already collected useful data through Access and Travel Management Plans and Watershed Analyses that provide a good starting point in some areas.

In addition, more Forest Service staff are needed to support project partnerships with landowners, tribes, and other agencies and organizations. One potential solution to inadequate funding for staff is to bring in outside federal agency personnel with expertise in project implementation.

Finally, watershed restoration projects must be monitored to ensure that road work is properly implemented and is effectively achieving the intended environmental benefits. The Initiative suggests dedicating 2 percent of project funds to monitoring.

The Watershed Restoration Initiative for national forest roads would be consistent with the road restoration work by hundreds of private timberland owners in Washington State to protect fish habitat and water quality under the auspices of the statewide Habitat Conservation Plan. According to industry statistics, road maintenance plans have been developed covering 8000 miles of stream; already 1400 fish blockages have been repaired, opening 800 miles of stream.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, The Wilderness Society and our partners in Washington State are very grateful for your support of watershed restoration. We want to emphasize our commitment to take on the serious challenge of healing the Skokomish, Hood Canal, and Puget Sound. Thank you for considering the information and funding requests that we have provided, and we look forward to working with you to solve the problems associated with Forest Service roads.