



Rivers: The Heart of America's Great Outdoors



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This past spring, President Obama launched the America's Great Outdoors initiative, his effort to chart a course for conservation in the 21st century. This exciting initiative is aimed at preserving our natural resources and promoting recreation, especially among youth. American Rivers rallied thousands of our supporters and the members of the 3,000 state and local river groups nationwide to turn out across the country at official and homegrown listening sessions hosted by the administration. All summer, from Los Angeles to Orlando, in Bangor and Bozeman, communities and local river groups told their river stories at these sessions, in the media, and online. This report describes these success stories and how the administration can take specific steps to transform how communities discover, protect and connect to the great outdoors through river restoration, protection and recreation.

In crafting a strategy for conserving America's Great Outdoors for the 21st Century we urge the administration to adopt the following recommendations.

- ***Discovering America's Great Outdoors***

All Americans deserve to enjoy our great outdoors, but far too many individuals do not have adequate access to clean, safe parks and natural spaces. A federal commitment is needed to provide access to new constituencies who have a need and desire to experience the outdoors on their hometown rivers, which are most often the natural asset nearest to their community. The great opportunity here is that not only are rivers and streams desirable places to recreate, but establishing urban parks and restoring riverfronts also provides direct economic, public health and community safety benefits.

- ***Connecting Communities, Landscapes, and Wildlife***

In order to protect our nation's river heritage and special places for the enjoyment of future generations, we need to establish and maintain river corridors for recreation and wildlife. Trail designations, like Blue Trails or Blueways, help to make the river a more inviting place for both people and wildlife. By including in their recommendations a National Blueways Initiative and the restoration and protection of wildlife corridors, the administration will provide numerous ways to connect people with rivers.

- ***Protecting Our River Heritage***

Pristine, iconic rivers are a fundamental part of the very fabric and history of America. We have a responsibility to keep these rivers healthy and pass on this legacy to our children and grandchildren. The America's Great Outdoors Initiative must protect and restore these important natural treasures. With so many rivers in our nation, their potential to connect communities to America's treasured landscapes is limitless. By protecting America's rivers through new Wild and Scenic River, Wilderness, National Wildlife Refuge and Outstanding Natural Resource Waters designations in priority watersheds, we can create a valuable legacy that honors the past, enriches the present, and provides a precious gift to the future.

INTRODUCTION

Every American deserves a clean, healthy river. Rivers, streams and creeks are found everywhere – from the most remote and untouched wilderness to the most modern city. They are a perfect way to help a broad cross-section of people discover America’s great outdoors. Healthy rivers connect communities with treasured landscapes and our nation’s rich natural history, while supporting recreation and wildlife. We must protect our nation’s river heritage and special places for the enjoyment of future generations.

Rivers and their surrounding lands provide us with lifelines. More than any other part of nature, they connect us as a nation, supply half of our drinking water, provide opportunities for recreation, fuel our economy, sustain natural systems, and enrich the quality of our lives. Freshwater is amongst the most top of mind issues when it comes to environmental issues, and access to clean water consistently ranks as the most important environmental issue for Americans. More than three million miles of rivers criss-cross our nation. In fact, nearly every American lives within one mile of a stream or river. With a river in everyone’s backyard, there is great potential for meeting the goals of America’s Great Outdoors.

Communities are transforming how they view their once neglected rivers. Across the country people are embracing innovative ways to manage rivers and riverside land, increasing outdoor recreation, establishing parks, and protecting fish and wildlife habitat. A growing recognition of the quality of life and economic benefits that improved access and sustainable management of our rivers provide has led many cities and towns across the country to protect and restore their rivers. River protection and restoration links land and water conservation in urban and rural areas and connects recreational and ecological assets like protected areas, wildlife refuges, parks, greenways, and hiking trails.

This can translate into financial benefits for local communities including increased spending in restaurants, hotels, and other amenities. Studies also indicate that property values near trails, parks, and other outdoor recreational facilities generally increase (<http://openlands.org>). Furthermore, healthy, functioning rivers are appealing and attractive to residents and businesses. An engaged public that enjoys riverfront features and activities also cares about the river’s long-term health.

Rivers offer a perfect opportunity for children and adults alike to discover the natural world, to connect communities with each other and with America’s treasured landscapes, and rivers are a fundamental part of our natural heritage and ecological health that deserve protection.

LISTENING SESSIONS

Throughout the summer thousands of Americans turned out at America’s Great Outdoors listening sessions to tell their stories about how river protection and restoration has transformed their communities. They highlighted success stories and ways federal cooperation and assistance would help increase outdoor recreation, increase outdoor activity for youth, and build support for conservation and new public-private partnerships among federal and state agencies, local communities, and non-profit organizations. These stories were echoed in local and regional media. Here is a small sampling of the stories that citizens around the country told at America’s Great Outdoors listening sessions both official and homegrown.



Charleston, South Carolina – June 28, 2010

The Charleston listening session focused primarily on forest issues but one river related conservation example stood out as a model worth replicating elsewhere in the country. The Congaree River Blue Trail, or Blueway, is the result of a partnership among federal, state, and local agencies, non-profit organizations, land trusts and private landowners. Starting near Columbia, South Carolina, this 50-mile water trail offers opportunities to experience the area's rich natural resources and wildlife through canoeing, kayaking, fishing, and other family friendly activities. The Congaree was designated by the Department of the Interior as a part of the National Trails System. The trail connects an urban center through private lands to the Congaree National Park, the largest protected wilderness in South Carolina and home to the largest tract of old growth bottomland hardwood forest in the U.S. (<http://congareriverbluetrail.blogspot.com>). As discussed below, we urge the Administration to build on the success of the Congaree River Blue Trail as a public, private partnership that has tangible conservation and recreation benefits by creating a national Blueways Initiative.

Los Angeles, California – July 8, 2010

Much of the buzz around the Los Angeles listening session was the announcement by U.S. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson the day before that her agency recognized the entire length of the Los Angeles River as "navigable water", a determination crucial to applying federal Clean Water Act protections throughout its watershed. For years the Los Angeles office of the Army Corps of Engineers has treated the river as nothing more than a drainage ditch and have prevented public access to what can and should be a tremendous public resource. Community members attending the listening session applauded EPA's decision and highlighted the many benefits a healthy and accessible Los Angeles River could be to the diverse populations along its course. They urged increased federal assistance to restore the river on its long journey back to health – particularly given the federal governments overwhelming responsibility for leaving it in its current degraded and segregated state. The session also focused heavily on the designation of the San Gabriel Mountains as wilderness to protect its clean water, outstanding habitat and quality recreation.

Asheville, North Carolina – July 15, 2010

In Asheville rivers and river-related recreation were a major focus. Many organizations have done an excellent job working to revitalize the French Broad, as part of a demonstration project for the whole watershed. So much progress has been made, but there is still work to do. Recently, the City of Rockingham, NC has been working to remove old dams, re-establish a robust downtown focused on the river, and create a 10-mile Blue Trail on Hitchcock Creek. Projects like these continue to connect individuals and communities to rivers and the outdoors. The vision of a clean and healthy river connected to parks, trails and other community amenities could become a reality with help from the America's Great Outdoors Initiative.

Denver and Grand Junction, Colorado – July 15-16, 2010

Approximately 500 people attended the session in Denver and heard Secretary Salazar express his desire to pass a second chapter of an omnibus open lands package. He highlighted the success of the first package, specifically mentioning the 1000 miles of wild and scenic rivers that were protected. He spoke of the importance of protecting our most valuable water resources, stating that "never again will we turn our back on rivers". This was a line that was repeated several times by Kevin Patterson, Manager of the Denver Parks and Recreation Department who spoke during the panel discussion.

When asked, "what is working locally to protect special places and to reconnect people to the outdoors and what should the administration focus on for AGO," Mr. Patterson answered by talking about the restoration of

the South Platte in Denver and how it has improved quality of life, served as an economic driver for the city and stands as a great example of how to reconnect people to the outdoors. When asked what the administration should prioritize for AGO, he answered that the administration should “focus efforts on restoring and protecting rivers” because of all the community benefits they provide. Secretary Salazar then asked the audience of 500 if they agreed and they responded with a resounding ‘yes!’

Grand Junction was an appropriate location for a listening session as it lies at the confluence of the Colorado and the Gunnison Rivers, two of the state’s finest, and is home to one of the country’s best success stories for how a community transformed itself through river conservation. In our report, *Natural Security: How Sustainable Water Strategies are Preparing Communities for a Changing Climate*, we highlight the work done by Grand Junction and seven other forward-looking communities that have become more resilient to the impacts of climate change by embracing green infrastructure. More information on river restoration occurring in Grand Junction is available on the American Rivers website, (<http://www.americanrivers.org/our-work/global-warming-and-rivers/infrastructure/natural-security-grand-junction.html>).

At the listening session Coloradoans highlighted the river restoration efforts that Grand Junction has embraced which have revitalized the local economy, strengthened ecosystems, and greatly improved the quality of life for area residents. The expansion of trails and parks around Grand Junction has reconnected the community with valuable natural resources – its rivers – that had previously been neglected and ignored. Residents have embraced the results of the river restoration activities. Success has stemmed from partnerships amongst city, county, state, and federal agencies, and the creation of a vision for an extended riverfront system of parks and trails throughout the Grand Mesa Valley, an area that includes three cities and over 100,000 people. Grand Junction’s river restoration activities have also benefited wildlife and local ecosystems by removing contaminants, improving fish passage, increasing riparian habitat. Much of the restoration activity was carried out by volunteers, and the ongoing efforts to remove invasive species and improve access to the river demonstrate the level of pride and dedication the community has for its riverfront area. The need for further investments in river restoration and protection was highlighted in a number of news articles and opinion pieces in the Boulder and Grand Junction newspapers.

Salt Lake City, Utah – Outdoor Retailer Summer Market August 3, 2010

Taking place at the annual Outdoor Retailer Show, conservation minded Utahans and leaders from the nation’s outdoor recreation companies alike highlighted the importance of rivers and the need to make them a focal point of America's Great Outdoors. Local rivers like the Colorado, the Green, and the Escalante offer world class boating and fishing, and are gateways to explore the state's unmatched national parks, wilderness, and other public lands. They are closely tied to the state’s economy, educational programs and recreation for both residents and tourists alike. With the designation of the Virgin River as the state’s first Wild and Scenic River in 2009, the people of Utah made an important first step in protecting its extraordinary natural heritage. Building on this success, Utahans at the session called for more Wild and Scenic designations for the state's rivers which would enhance recreation and boost the tourism economy. They also called for protections for the Green River, which is threatened by a proposal to divert 250,000 acre feet of water to Colorado. The Green River is a world-renown river and one of the West’s most pristine river ecosystems and it deserves to be saved for the benefit of future generations.

Poughkeepsie and Hyde Park, New York – August 5-6, 2010

The listening sessions in New York were the first to hold breakout sessions specifically to discuss the efforts of local communities to build Blueways which reconnect people to the outdoors and to recreation. Blueways such as the Hudson River Watertrail and the New York City Watertrail were highlighted emphasizing the

importance of not only connecting citizens to the outdoors, but also reestablishing a healthy river. The Hudson River Watertrail, established in 1992, strives to preserve the Hudson River and create a trail from the mouth of the Hudson River to the St. Lawrence Seaway, passing through the Great Lakes. The Watertrail, located in New York City is an excellent way to connect all people to the river. There are 160 square miles of water to paddle through in all five boroughs. The incorporation of Blueways into states such as New York, will only increase the connection citizens have with the outdoors even in the most densely populated area in the United States.

Minneapolis, Minnesota – August 4, 2010

Partly due to grassroots organizing and session planning, and partly due to the multitude of initiatives already underway in the region, rivers were the center of attention at the Minneapolis session. Total attendance was about 400 for the plenary session, about 100 river voices. Participants stressed the point that while the Mississippi borders 10 different states there is little coordination among them. A federal role is needed to fill that niche and to establish and advance a comprehensive restoration plan.

Naturally, one regional program that particularly meets the definition and goals of AGO was highlighted during the session - the Urban Wilderness Canoe Adventure (UWCA) in the Mississippi National River Park and Recreation Area. This is a great example of how federal resources and technical assistance can be brought to bear to help facilitate and foster the use and enjoyment of our public spaces by people from all walks of life. The UWCA is an outdoor canoe program focused on getting youth from the Twin Cities on the Mississippi River as a part of the National River Park, a unique federal, state and local National Park partnership. In June of this year, this program was chosen as one of twenty pilot parks to initiate the First Lady's "Let's Move Outside" Junior Ranger Program campaign to give parents and their kids the tools to get outside. In addition to this program, session participants pointed to the rather extensive network of blueways already in place throughout Minnesota and urged further federal involvement and support.

St. Louis, Missouri – August 20, 2010

In St. Louis, the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers are at the center of the community as well as the heart of the outdoors so it wasn't surprising that rivers were the focal point of the listening session. Over 250 youth participated in the session hosted by Assistant Secretary of the Army, Jo Ellen Darcy on the banks of Mississippi River. Attendees highlighted the Lewis and Clark Water Trail and the Mississippi River Water Trail as wonderful community assets. They clamored for the Administration to do more to connect people to rivers like the Meramec – one of Missouri's longest free-flowing rivers, a tremendous conservation success story, and a popular destination for canoeists and hikers. They also called for the administration to promote natural flood protection, helping communities implement 21st century solutions like floodplain and wetland restoration. Local restoration projects at Columbia Bottom Conservation Area and Cora Island are good examples. On Cora Island, wetlands will be restored to help manage floodwaters, and the public will enjoy birdwatching, fishing and hiking.

Another great example of people working together is the Missouri River Stream Team, a partnership of citizens concerned about the Missouri River who participate in hands-on projects such as litter control, streambank stabilization, streamside tree planting, water quality monitoring, and storm drain stenciling. Since its inception, the Stream Team has trained hundreds of volunteer specialists, removed over 1,000 tons of trash from rivers and planted tens of thousands of trees along the river. As a result of media coverage and heightened community awareness and interest in stream problems and opportunities, the program continues to grow.

Citizens also highlighted another Midwest success story, the 10,000 Rain Gardens Program – a public-private initiative involving citizens, corporations, educators, nonprofits, and local government agencies in Kansas City that works to educate the public and promote citizen involvement in reducing flooding and improving water quality by instituting measures like green roofs (rooftops planted with vegetation) and rain gardens (water-tolerant plants that soak up stormwater). Since 2005, they have registered 254 rain barrels, 304 rain gardens, and two green roofs in the Kansas City Metropolitan Area.

Finally, the management of the Ozark National Scenic Riverways was also a major concern to participants. They highlighted the need for the National Park Service to take action to protect this national treasured landscape. The Jacks and Current Rivers have been subjected to overuse that threatens the values that deemed the rivers nationally significant and worthy of protection. This is illustrative of the kind of neglect that exists for special places like these around the country.

Orlando, Florida – August 26, 2010

River protection and restoration was a major focus in Florida, because the state has arguably the most extensive and popular water trail system in the nation and an ever growing need for sustainable flows of clean water for fish, wildlife and people. Florida is defined by water and is home to some of our nation's premier water trails and was the perfect place to highlight the economic, recreation and conservation benefits of water trails and blueways. Local groups called for the establishment of a National Blueways Initiative, as featured in an opinion piece in the Orlando Sentinel.

Another historic land conservation opportunity is a 4,000-acre area vital to groundwater recharge and endangered species in Southwest Florida – known as Edison Farms. The property which has been identified and sought for decades as a priority acquisition project by federal, state and local agencies, would connect to thousands of acres of already preserved lands to create contiguous landscape-level habitat and water resource protection.

Nashville, Tennessee – August 27, 2010

Over 300 people converged on Nashville to attend the August 27 meeting of America's Great Outdoors. Karl Dean, Mayor of Nashville and Senator Alexander opened the meeting with positive remarks asking for full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund. There were four breakout groups that discussed issues ranging from blueways to bike lanes as potential recipients of this funding. Emphasis was placed on protecting the Cumberland Plateau which has both environmental and historic significance to Tennesseans and tourists. Watershed organizations called for increased funding for the creation of a blueway initiative to link our parks and scenic vistas.

Bangor, Maine – September 2, 2010

The Penobscot River Restoration Project is one of the largest river restoration projects ever proposed and provides a great example of how public and private conservation partnerships can succeed. The increased interest in restoration helped to focus discussion at the Maine listening session towards rivers. The listening session in Maine highlighted the effort to remove the Penobscot's outdated dams to restore access to 1,000 miles of fish habitat while simultaneously maintaining the same level of hydropower production in the basin. This project has the potential to be a model for rivers around the country: improved health, restored fish and wildlife, balanced energy production, and revitalized communities through increased recreation and economic opportunities. The continuation of restoration is crucial for the Penobscot River, as well as other rivers throughout Maine and the United States.

Phoenix, Arizona – Homegrown Session Hosted by American Rivers – September 2, 2010

Rivers in Arizona provide a much-needed respite for people and wildlife in an otherwise arid landscape, noted AGO participants at a Phoenix listening session on September 2nd. The state's unique Sonoran Desert riparian rivers – such as the San Pedro, Haunted Canyon, Devil's Canyon, the Verde, and the Salt – serve as major flyways for migratory birds and critical wildlife corridors. Most Arizona rivers are significantly threatened, however, by ongoing or proposed mining, logging, grazing, land development, and groundwater mining.

At the homegrown listening session in Phoenix roughly sixty Arizonans came together and identified the lack of funding for conservation programs such as the LWCF, including a lack of agency staff positions, as well as a general lack of education and awareness programs that involve youth, families, and diverse constituencies, as the major challenges and obstacles to achieving conservation goals and reconnecting people with nature. Attendees felt programs to get people out into nature – volunteering, doing service projects, and enjoying outings – are the most effective ways to reconnect people to the outdoors and encourage their stewardship. Programs such as Sierra Club's Inner City Outings were specifically called out.

The panel of experts called out designating the Upper Verde River as Wild and Scenic as a priority for providing needed protections for this important yet highly threatened river in central Arizona. Those working to protect the middle Verde see great potential for a Middle Verde Blueway (as part of a National Blueways Initiative) companion to the Verde River Greenway, part of the State Parks program.

Memphis, Tennessee – Homegrown Session Hosted by American Rivers – September 9, 2010

A diverse collection of Memphis policymakers and citizens gathered on September 8th at the national headquarters of Ducks Unlimited. Congressman Steve Cohen and Shelby County Mayor Mark Luttrell, Jr. joined representatives of the Memphis Metro region, the Tennessee Legislature, and local fishing, conservation, and canoe clubs to discuss the region's recreation and conservation challenges, including both urban and rural issues.

Beset by both water pollution from sewage and channelization, the region's rivers face hurdles before they can be fully enjoyed. Yet session attendees see progress with the Wolf River Greenway and Blueway, which flows through the region before joining the Mississippi. The Wolf River was central to the discussion, with excitement over the progress with trails at Shelby Farms, and the hope of building educational and launching facilities near the rivers of the region's six counties and transforming 30 to 40 miles of upriver wildlands into a Blueway. Attendees noted the Shelby Bottoms Trail and Greenway along the Cumberland River in Nashville as an inspiring example of success. Others raised the successful recreation economies built around the Buffalo and Spring Rivers, believing the clear waters, strong logistics and transportation, and marketing ensured residents would visit and enjoy those rivers.

Local farmers also attended the listening session, as did AmeriCorps members. They called for an increase in programs supporting urban agriculture in Northern Memphis and efforts to get youth to connect to the outdoors with hands-on farming options. Attendees noted the possibility of connecting Wolf River work to farming, as the family farmers near I-240 about an eight-acre lake and the Wolf River. Other session participants lauded the successful efforts in Tennessee, Arkansas, and Kentucky that connect science curriculum to hands-on water care, using physics, chemistry, and biology to assess river health and problems. Session participants stayed afterward, building new connections based on the shared ideas and visions for regional greenways and blueways.

RECOMMENDATIONS

America's Great Outdoors will only be successful if the important values and broad concepts that have received the support of millions of Americans are translated into tangible, meaningful policy and public investment. What follows is a basic framework for how the Administration should look to rivers to help animate its vision of AGO as well as some specific policy recommendations to implement it.

Discover America's Great Outdoors

All American's deserve to enjoy our great outdoors, but far too many individuals do not have adequate access to clean, safe parks and natural spaces. For many Americans, their first real experience with the outdoors and the natural world is a creek, stream, river, or lake. It's no wonder since virtually all Americans live within a mile of such waters. Sadly, too many communities, large and small, have turned their backs on their rivers and many are no longer accessible, enjoyable, or even safe for people to discover our natural world. Fortunately, rivers are resilient and with some care and commitment, are able to bounce back. A federal commitment from a variety of different fronts is necessary to provide access to new constituencies who have a need and desire to experience the outdoors on their hometown rivers, which are most often the natural asset nearest to their community. The great opportunity here is that not only are rivers and streams desirable places to recreate, but establishing urban parks and restoring riverfronts also provide direct economic, public health and community safety benefits.

Numerous anecdotes and studies demonstrate that communities from Chattanooga, TN to Portland, OR have rediscovered their rivers have enjoyed significant benefits by attracting new businesses, retaining populations, and enhancing property values. By strategically locating and developing open spaces, places like Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Toledo, Ohio, and Chicago, Illinois are able to significantly reduce their level of polluted stormwater run-off. In places like Tulsa, Oklahoma and Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, people have been able to move frequently flooded properties out of harm's way to higher ground and reclaim those abandoned lands for public spaces that also more effectively and cheaply manage flooding. Those same lands provide a tremendous resource for the community year round and serve as entry points for people to discover America's outdoors. After devastating flooding in 1965, the City of Denver launched efforts to clean and improve the South Platte River and Cherry Creek, establishing 150 miles of hiker and bicycle trails, boat launches, whitewater chutes, and parks. Throughout the country, citizens are also discovering their streams, rivers, and lakes through volunteer efforts and programs like the National River Clean-up™. Clean-ups provide a fantastic opportunity to introduce citizens to the outdoors and create new stewards in the process.

Sitting at the confluence of five different rivers, Dayton, OH sees the unique value and importance of restoring and protecting these resources for the many benefits they can provide the community. Like a growing number of places throughout the nation, civic leaders have banded together to undertake comprehensive planning, fundraising, and project implementation to make their rivers a central part of the community's identity and future. Communities like Dayton cannot do this without the financial, technical, and political support of the federal government. What follows are recommendations for some specific programs that would support these kinds of efforts in communities across the country.

1. Increase funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund

Established in 1964 the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) provides much-needed dollars to federal land management and state and local conservation agencies for purchasing ecologically and recreationally important lands. LWCF has proven highly successful, enabling the nation to protect millions of acres, including national seashores, rivers, trails, and lakeshores. LWCF projects have helped states and localities purchase some 2.6 million acres of land and advanced river restoration

through acquisition of riverside lands to serve as buffer zones. The annual need for riverside conservation funding far outstrips the resources available to realize the demand. The Administration should support and advocate for full and dedicated funding for the LWCF, \$900 million annually to allow communities to realize the full potential of riverside land and park conservation nationwide.

2. Leverage existing programs to build “green infrastructure”

Meeting our nation’s water resource needs is something that has been traditionally accomplished through pipes, plants, levees, and dams. We spend billions of dollars each year building, maintaining, and operating this “grey” water infrastructure to meet our growing needs, but communities throughout the country are beginning to embrace a new path. By investing in approaches that rely upon natural landscapes – e.g. wetlands, floodplains, forests – communities can maintain clean water, ensure adequate water supplies, and manage floods, by developing parks and other green spaces. There are numerous federal programs that help fund water infrastructure that can and should be shaped and leveraged to not only meet those water management goals but can be used to purchase and develop parks and open spaces for communities around the nation.

- EPA Clean Water State Revolving Fund – CWSRF programs provided more than \$5 billion annually in recent years to fund water quality protection projects for wastewater treatment, nonpoint source pollution control, and watershed and estuary management. Funding for this program needs to be leveraged and used for the development of natural landscapes and parks that will provide adequate clean water supply.
- FEMA Mitigation Grant Program – FEMA’s mission is to reduce the loss of life and property and protect communities nationwide from all hazards, including natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and other man-made disasters. FEMA leads and supports the nation in a risk-based, comprehensive emergency management system of preparedness, protection, response, recovery and mitigation. FEMA's Mitigation Grant programs allow communities to become more resilient through buyouts, relocation, and elevation among other activities and include the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, the Flood Mitigation Assistance program, the Pre-Disaster Mitigation program, and the Repetitive Flood Claims and the Severe Repetitive Loss programs. Funding for these programs needs to be leveraged and invested in the development of natural landscapes and green space to help manage floods and other disasters.
- HUD Disaster Recovery Enhancement Fund – HUD’s mission is to create strong, sustainable, inclusive communities and quality affordable homes. HUD’s Disaster Recovery Enhancement Fund (DREF) purpose is to reward states that invested in its Community Development Block Grant disaster recovery funding in activities that reduce risks from future disasters and to assist with the additional cost of mitigating future risk for such projects as buyouts, relocation, improving homes and building codes and land-use planning. DREF program funding needs to be leveraged and put towards the restoration of natural landscapes that provide protection from disasters, parks development, and improvement to water quantity and quality.
- EPA Brownfields – EPA's Brownfields Program is designed to prevent, assess, safely clean up, and sustainably reuse brownfields. A brownfield is a property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant. Funding of the Brownfield

program needs to be leveraged and allocated to the development of parks, restored natural landscapes and places for outdoor recreation.

The Administration should establish criteria for these spending programs that encourages and promotes green, multipurpose projects such as the so-called “green reserve” in the Clean Water Act State Revolving Loan Fund. Programs like those above will ensure natural landscapes are protected while providing and enhancing the quality and quantity of the local water.

3. Restore Rivers by Fostering Volunteerism

Millions of tons of trash end up in our nation’s rivers and streams every year and while this debris may not pose the greatest threat to our nation’s rivers, it does represent the most visible. One of the most frequent and easiest ways to introduce and engage citizens with the outdoors and environmental stewardship is through river and stream clean-ups. This was clearly evidenced by testimony from several listening sessions, including St. Louis. America’s Great Outdoors should fund a grant program to better facilitate and foster these efforts nation wide. A commitment of \$11 million annually to the River Clean-up Program will result in 2,000 river clean-ups each year, and lead to the removal of more than 20 million pounds of trash. Full program funding will provide each clean up with \$5,000 for expenses, and also provide an additional \$1 million dollars for a river clean-up director and staff.

4. Urban Waters Initiative

EPA’s Urban Waters Initiative should be used to better connect people to their rivers in urban areas. Clean and safe water directly relates to well being. According to a recent Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index survey residents living in the top 10 metro areas for access to clean and safe water are 8 percentage points more likely to be satisfied with their city or area as a place to live, and more than 10 points more likely to say their city is "getting better" than are those living in the bottom 10 metro areas for access to quality water. While the Administration has focused on smart growth issues in cities, access to clean water should also be a priority. Increasing funding for river access and increasing urban green infrastructure will provide multiple benefits to city-dwellers including improved public health, reduced air pollution, increased access to green space, reduced local flooding and clean water.

Rivers *Connect* Communities, Landscapes, and Wildlife

Healthy rivers connect communities to our nation’s cherished landscapes and rich natural history, while also supporting recreation and wildlife habitat. Rivers connect communities to other communities along their path and connect communities to national treasures such as parks, refuges, and forests both upstream and down. They provide a natural linkage between communities and the outdoors, rural and urban areas, developed areas and treasured landscapes. They also help connect us to our families by providing safe and healthy recreation and environmental education opportunities for people of all ages. These experiences help connect us to special protected areas such as wildlife refuges, parks, and forests and build partnerships and support for conservation of these special places.

Rivers are a great way to meet our growing need for outdoor recreation. There has been tremendous growth in water recreation in recent years. Fishing is recognized as the top “gateway” activity —spurring involvement in other outdoor interests. In 2009, more than 77 percent of fishing enthusiasts participated in multiple outdoor activities. Freshwater fishing, with 41 million participants in 2009, is by far the most popular type of fishing in the United States. With more than 725 million annual outings and representing more than 14 percent of the U.S. population, freshwater fishing is also the most popular fishing activity amongst youth. (Outdoor Industry Foundation, Special Report on Fishing and Boating 2010). Canoeing and kayaking are also some of the most popular outdoor activities today. Participation in canoeing and kayaking has grown from 2.6 million in 1960 to

more than 26 million in 2000 and the number of users is expected to grow at a rate of 30% greater than population growth through 2050 (Outdoor Industry Foundation; Fall 2006). Yet the number and variety of public places and access to outdoor recreation has not kept pace.

The vegetation surrounding river or wildlife corridors assist in the perpetuation of water, fish, wildlife, rangeland, and forest resources. These riparian zones possess an unusually diverse array of species and environmental processes. The diversity stems from variations in flood regimes, unique channel processes, climate shifts, and upland influences on the river corridor. The dynamic environment of river corridors supports a variety of species lifecycles, nutrient cycles, such as the water cycle, and organisms adapted to disturbance regimes over broad spatial and temporal scales.³ Protection of river corridors is critical for the survival of many species. Eighty-two percent of all species annually breeding in northern Colorado occur in riparian vegetation,² and 51% of all species in southwestern states are completely dependent on riparian vegetation.¹ Loss of the riparian component in the southwestern states could potentially result in the loss of 78 (47%) of the 166 avian species that breed in the region.¹ Protected river corridors provide many iconic species with a thriving environment.

The Patapsco River Restoration Project in Maryland is working to restore more than 30 miles of river corridor habitat for diadromous species. The removal of dams along the river will result in restoration of a free-flowing system. This includes a return of natural hydrological processes, increased diversity and relative abundance of native lotic fish and nonfish species, restored vegetative buffers, improved water quality through decreased stream temperatures and increased dissolved oxygen levels, and reduced occurrences of flooding and stream erosion through restored stream channel capacity and sediment transport. The Patapsco River's strategic location and the richness of the resource provide an opportunity to use the river to educate local communities on the protection and restoration tools and help more people connect with the river.

In order to protect our nation's river heritage and special places for the enjoyment of future generations, we need to establish and maintain river corridors for recreation and wildlife. Trail designations, like Blue Trails or Blueways, help to make the river a more inviting place for both people and wildlife. By including a National Blueways Initiative and continuing to restore and protect wildlife corridors, the administration will provide numerous ways of connecting people with rivers. Below are recommendations for programs that will help to further connect individuals and communities to our river heritage.

1. Establish a National Blueways Initiative

Blueways (a.k.a. blue trails or water trails) are an innovative, locally-driven way to connect people with rivers and riverside lands. Across the country participants in the listening sessions highlighted the blueways on their hometown river and called for the establishment of a national blueways initiative. A blueway is a dedicated stretch of river that enjoys special clean water safeguards and is a destination for fishing, boating, and other recreation. Blueways, like hiking trails, help people discover rivers and provide a connection between both urban and rural communities and the outdoors. Blueways provide a fun and exciting way to get youth outdoors and are economic drivers benefiting local businesses and the quality of life.

¹ Johnson et. al. 1977. Importance Preservation and Management of Riparian Habitat: a Symposium. U.S. Dep. Agric., For. Serv. Gen. Tech. Rep. RM-43.

²Knopf, F. L. 1985. Significance of Riparian Vegetation to Breeding Birds across an Altitudinal Cline. Pp. 105-111 in Riparian ecosystems and their management: reconciling conflicting uses.

³ Naiman, R.J. and Decamps, H. 1997. The Ecology of Interfaces: Riparian Zones. P.p. 621-658. *Annual Rev. Ecol. Syst.*

The Obama Administration should establish a National Blueways Initiative using existing authority granted to the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture under the National Trails System Act. Through this initiative the Administration should seek nominations from communities from around the country and formally designate 20 new rivers and water trails as National Blueways. In support of participating communities, the Administration should provide financial and technical assistance through a new or expanded program. Communities seeking a National Blueways designation for their water trail would need to meet specific criteria including community support and a plan to increase access, outdoor recreation, and specific conservation measures for protection of the river and its riparian corridor. The Congaree River Blue Trail, mentioned above, is an example of a water trail that already has been designated under the Act by DOI.

Establishment of a national Blueways Initiative would improve regional and landscape level conservation through development of partnerships across all levels of government, non-profit organizations, and private landowners. Expanding on the National Trails System model, the national Blueways Program would emphasize the connection of communities and America's treasured landscapes, and require plans and strategies for protecting these areas and enhancing connections.¹ The initiative would provide for trail-wide coordination and management of lands owned by government and private entities along Blueways.

2. Restore and Protect Wildlife Corridors

One of the defining characteristics of America's outdoors is its abundant and diverse populations of fish and wildlife. There are numerous existing federal programs that protect and restore rivers as critical wildlife corridors and habitats. Increased support for and coordination of these programs is vital to meeting the vision and goals of America's Great Outdoors. Three programs are worthy of specific note but there are many others:

- NOAA Community Based Restoration Program – The NOAA Restoration Center's Community-based Restoration Program invests funding and technical expertise in high-priority habitat restoration projects that instill strong conservation values and engage citizens in hands-on activities. Through the program, NOAA, its partners, and thousands of volunteers are actively restoring coastal, marine, and migratory fish habitat across the nation.
- USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program – Through voluntary agreements the Partners program provides expert technical assistance and cost-share incentives directly to private landowners to restore fish and wildlife habitats. Any privately-owned land is potentially eligible for restoration. Most participants are individual private landowners. For purposes of this program, "privately-owned" means land not owned by a State or the Federal Government. Benefits for the landowner include fulfilling habitat conservation goals on the land by working one-on-one in partnership with the local Service biologist; and for the species, restoring the important habitats on private lands that may result in the recovery of Federal trust species.
- NRCS Conservation Programs – NRCS is a leader in working with farmers and rural communities to restore and protect water resources. These include numerous place based efforts such as the Mississippi River and Chesapeake Bay, Conservation Technical Assistance Programs, Environmental Improvement Programs, Stewardship Programs, Water Resources

¹ A comprehensive step-by-step guide on planning, building, and maintaining Blue Trails for conservation can be found in the Blue Trails Guide at <http://www.BlueTrailsGuide.org>, developed by American Rivers.

Protect Our River Heritage

Pristine, iconic rivers are a fundamental part of the very fabric and history of America. We have a responsibility to keep these rivers healthy and pass on this legacy to our kids and grandkids. America's Great Outdoors Initiative must protect and restore these important natural treasures. With so many rivers in our nation, their potential to connect communities to America's treasured landscapes is limitless. By protecting America's rivers, we can create a valuable legacy that honors the past, enriches the present, and provides a precious gift to the future.

1. Designate and Manage Wild and Scenic Rivers

The passage of the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) in 1968 established one of our nation's strongest conservation tools for rivers. The law calls for the nation to set aside and permanently protect our best rivers, their free-flowing qualities and outstandingly remarkable values for the benefit of present and future generations. Communities have been calling for Wild and Scenic River protection for our nation's most outstanding and highly-prized rivers for four decades. Today the Wild and Scenic Rivers System includes more than 12,000 miles of a growing list of well over 200 rivers across the country.

Four federal agencies share responsibility for administering designated rivers, conducting studies to determine if rivers qualify for wild and scenic river designation, and developing wild and scenic river management plans: the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Currently over 3,400 streams totaling 84,500 stream miles are potentially eligible for designation and these streams offer an untapped opportunity for river protection. The Administration should identify and prioritize a new round of designations and direct each agency to develop new guidance for how these eligible rivers are managed in the mean time, to assure compliance with the WSRA. Strong guidance would administratively protect tens of thousands of the highest quality miles of rivers nationwide. Since rivers do not stop at administrative boundaries, federal agencies should direct resources to help communities protect and enhance portions of rivers adjacent to designated segments creating a more comprehensive approach to managing the national treasures while improving public outreach.

Americans are proud of these great rivers but once designated their continued protection and enhancement relies on high quality, well coordinated and sustained management by federal and some state agencies responsible for the day to day management of Wild and Scenic Rivers. Dedicated agency staff are working on the ground around the country to protect the natural heritage of our Wild and Scenic Rivers, but their work is increasingly challenging mainly due to lack of coordination, staffing and funding. There is a backlog of incomplete or out of date Wild and Scenic River management plans which has left Wild and Scenic Rivers unprotected exposing the federal government to conflicts over use and costly litigation. With increased staffing funding, these agencies could complete and update management plans and studies to identify additional rivers that qualify for designation. Additional funding would also allow them to better manage and protect designated rivers and promote their values to the public.

Although all Wild and Scenic Rivers involve various types of partnerships, the National Park Service's Partnership Rivers Program helps communities protect their river with local, state and federal cooperation. The Partnership Program, a part of the larger Wild and Scenic Rivers System is an excellent example of public-private cooperation that works, is cost-effective, and has a far-reaching

effect on protection and public awareness of our nation's special rivers. The model program was named one of the Top 50 Government Innovations by the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. The growing list of Partnership Rivers are located in seven states on the Eastern Seaboard. Resources are needed to support this excellent example of a public and private partnership. The Administration should significantly expand and enhance this program by increasing support for the local organizations working to protect and enhance currently designated rivers and to greatly increase the number and extent of these partnership designations.

2. Other Designations that Benefit Rivers

Because rivers and streams are found in virtually any landscape, there are a variety of other protective designations beyond Wild and Scenic Rivers that should be used to safeguard our natural river heritage.

- Wilderness – Designation of Wilderness protects the landscapes around some of our most precious and important rivers and streams. There are hundreds of thousands of eligible acres containing thousands of river miles, worthy of protection by the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture.
- Wildlife Refuges - Designation of Wildlife Refuges can also be an effective means of protecting some of our most treasured river landscapes. One model worthy of close examination and replication is the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge running along the Connecticut River. One of only three refuges with “fish” in the title, the refuge is unique for its broad scope and incorporation of private lands in the four states that comprise the Connecticut River basin. The refuge works in partnership with a wide variety of individuals and organizations to provide environmental education, to encourage and support appropriate habitat conservation and management on public and private lands, and to protect habitat. Several interstate waterways, like the Connecticut, are wonderful candidates for such a grassroots generated designation.
- Outstanding Natural Resource Waters – Finally, the Clean Water Act presents an important opportunity to protect our best water resources for future generations. Federal antidegradation policy requires states to maintain and protect waters that constitute “an outstanding National resource” including “waters of exceptional recreational or ecological significance.” 40 CFR 131.12. These so-called Outstanding Natural Resource Waters are administered by States but the EPA can and should do more to provide direction and encouragement for additional designations throughout the country.

CONCLUSION

On April 16th President Obama launched the America's Great Outdoors Initiative to chart a course for 21st Century conservation by gathering public input and highlight conservation success stories from all around the country. The last time a President took such a bold step, Teddy Roosevelt created the National Park System. This year, we have an equally great opportunity to shape the direction of conservation for generations to come. As evidenced by the outpouring of input from 3,000 or more local, state and regional river conservation groups nationwide this summer at the listening sessions. Communities are recognizing the importance of rivers and taking action to protect and restore them. By adopting the recommendations above, the Administration can build upon this growing movement among communities working to connect with the outdoors and our nation's rich natural history, while supporting recreation.