

Chairwoman Lisa Murkowski
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
DSOB 304
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator,

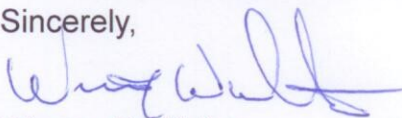
As the Sheriff in Hidalgo County, New Mexico, I am writing to express my opposition to S. 3670, the M.H. Dutch Salmon Greater Gila Wild and Scenic River Act. New Mexicans have lived and worked on these lands for over a century, preserving our rivers as a life sustaining resource. However, S. 3670 threatens our heritage and destroys our ability to continue to work on these lands and care for them as we have for decades.

Many of the rivers included in S. 3670 are working rivers and have been for over a century. These rivers host water diversions, livestock infrastructure, irrigated facilities and heavy employment mining concerns. S. 3670 fails to protect the ability to repair or replace these facilities in the future and fails to protect water right holders' ability to secure their water. Several of these rivers naturally dry up annually and do not reflect the natural free flowing nature described by the Wild and Scenic River Act. All of the rivers within the long established Wilderness areas are already protected at our nation's highest level from development pursuant to the Wilderness Act and an additional Wild and Scenic designation provides no additional protection but only places additional burdens on the US Forest Service to provide additional planning documents and administration under the Act. A Wild and Scenic designation would only further deplete the already stretched resources and budget of the US Forest Service making actual conservation work even less of a priority.

The designations included in S. 3670 far exceed any recommendations of the professionals of the US Forest Service in the past and currently. The Forest Service is currently undertaking a Forest Plan revision and the Draft Plan calls for a significant increase in the rivers eligible for designation under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act compared to the already established 2002 Forest Plan. The current planning effort is an open public process conducted pursuant to NEPA with input from interdisciplinary experts. This planning process must be respected so that all New Mexicans can provide input into the management and protection of lands and water in the Gila National Forest.

I urge you to oppose S. 3670 as it threatens the heritage of New Mexicans who live and work on the lands and rivers of the Gila River drainage. Many property owners along these rivers are multi-generational families. They have watched over and protected these waters since before statehood, working the land when it was nothing but raw untamed wilderness. They are the true guardians of this land and its most important natural resource, water. I ask you to respect these people and to respect the NEPA process by opposing this legislation aimed at controlling all the Gila and San Francisco river drainages.

Sincerely,



Warren D. Walter

Sheriff