

*Gerald W. Billings Jr.*  
*Grant County New Mexico Commissioner - District 4*  
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July 18, 2020

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski, Chair,  
US Senate Committee: Energy and Natural Resources  
DSOB 304  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator,

My constituents and I need your help. Several thousand residents and landowners who live on or near the Gila and San Francisco Rivers in Southwest New Mexico have not been heard and are not being represented as their livelihoods and the rural communities in which they live are being threatened by the proposed S. 3670 M.H. Dutch Salmon Greater Gila Wild and Scenic River Act. Many of these citizens have farmed and ranched on the Gila for generations; preserving and protecting the land and using the waters of the Gila to create beautiful and productive farms and fields, as well as thriving wildlife habitats. They know and love the Gila, and their voices deserve to be heard. If given the opportunity, we would like to show how S. 3670 threatens their heritage and rights as private property owners to continue to work on and care for these lands, and how the act actually threatens the health of the river itself.

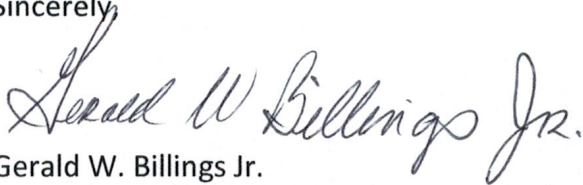
The Gila and San Francisco Rivers are developed and working rivers and have been for over a century and a half. Pseudo-environmental groups repeatably echo that the Gila is the last free-flowing river in the U.S., but saying this over and over again does not make it true; these waters are not free-flowing because they host numerous water diversions, ditches, wells, and other infrastructure and facilities, which have been developed for productive use of the water in farming the land. 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 and use their water to continue farming and ranching. The proposed designations are not reflective of the natural free-flowing nature described by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Most of the proposed waterways in S. 3670 are not rivers at all, but largely dry river beds or sand-washes that only flow seasonally or occasionally.

The introduction of S. 3670 ignored the US Forest Service public planning process and the proposed designations included in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act far exceed any recommendations of the professionals of the US Forest Service. The areas proposed for

designation within the established Wilderness areas are already protected pursuant to the Wilderness Act and an additional Wild and Scenic designation provides no additional protection but would place additional burdens and restrictions on the US Forest Service, thus limiting their ability to properly manage the Gila River and Watershed. Wild and Scenic designation will be a conduit through which litigious environmental groups such as the Center for Biological Diversity will continue to sue the federal government, resulting in further limitations on multiple use and stifling the economies of small rural communities dependent on farming and ranching, hunting and fishing, logging and other multiple-use activities.

We only ask that you please hear the people who live in the actual areas that will be affected by S. 3670. If given a chance, we can make a strong case against S. 3670. Many hundreds of citizens have gathered to voice their concerns about Wild and Scenic in several small New Mexico communities along the rivers including Virden, Cliff, Gila, Mimbres, Glenwood, and Reserve, but no one on the federal level has come to listen. We will come to Washington at our own expense to testify further on these matters if given the opportunity. Thank you for your many years of service and for your help in restoring our faith in the American representative process and the idea of Government of the people, for the people, and by the people.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gerald W. Billings Jr." The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Gerald W. Billings Jr.  
District 4 Grant County Commissioner