

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

April 25, 2018

The Honorable Ryan K. Zinke
Secretary of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Mail Stop 7328
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

RE: Extension of Public Land Order No. 7819 for 17 miles (5,600 acres) of the National Wild and Scenic Chetco River, Oregon

Dear Secretaries Zinke and Perdue:

As you are aware, we have repeatedly written to you over the last decade supporting the withdrawal of Oregon's iconic Chetco River from mineral entry. We are writing to you today with extreme urgency. The 5-year secretarial withdrawal for 17 miles of the National Wild and Scenic Chetco River in Southwest Oregon will expire on July 25, 2018. If the process to extend the current Public Land Order (No. 7819) is not completed before this date, we will lose precious ground in protecting this world-class salmon and steelhead river and source of clean drinking water for two communities while Congress considers our legislation to make the withdrawal permanent.

The process for the extension was initiated in 2016 by the U.S. Forest Service, the primary land managing agency, and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), who ultimately issues the Public Land Order. The U.S. Forest Service is on record of supporting the extension. Legislation has been continuously introduced in both the House of Representatives and the Senate since 2010.

Earlier progress reports to our staffs indicated that the extension was on schedule and that the reasoning for an extension was still valid. However, now, with the expiration date of the current 5-year withdrawal fast approaching, and what appears to be insufficient time to complete the process to extend it, our staffs cannot learn anything concrete about what is happening or what is causing what appears to be an inexcusable delay.

There are a number of separate pieces of legislation before Congress to permanently withdraw this stretch of Wild and Scenic River from mineral entry and location under the mining laws of the United States and to make technical corrections to the river classification. These river classification corrections were recommended by the U.S. Forest Service in the Chetco Wild and Scenic River Management Plan.

You should also know that the threat to the river when we introduced our legislation was no small matter. There were proposals to mine its bed for almost the full length of river subject to the withdrawal. However, during the time that the interim withdrawal has been in place, most of the existing federal mining claims have been eliminated and the few mining plans of operation that were submitted to the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest have been put in their inactive file. This has come at no cost to the taxpayer or agencies and it only happened because the withdrawal was in place. We want to make very clear that we do not want to see the Wild and Scenic Chetco River open to mining again.

Finally, the interim 5-year withdrawal was overwhelmingly supported locally and nationally.

Time is of the essence and we are seeking your assurance that the Department of Interior is expeditiously working to administratively extend the withdrawal protecting the Chetco River before it expires. We will continue to work with our colleagues in the Senate and House of Representatives to pass the legislation that would permanently protect the Chetco, but we ask that you turn your immediate attention to providing the extension while the legislative branch completes its work.


Please inform our office within five working days of the status of the withdrawal administrative extension within the Department of Interior; the timing of the Federal Register notice announcing a public comment period; the length and timing of the public comment period; and whether the Department requires any additional information to process the administrative extension.

We also ask that you explore any other authorities that you have that allow for an emergency withdrawal that would protect the extraordinary values that would otherwise be lost. Our offices are at your disposal to assist in expediting the administrative extension of PLO 7819, and we look forward to hearing from you soon regarding your progress.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
U.S. Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
U.S. Senator



Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



Peter DeFazio
Member of Congress