

April 10, 2008

STATEMENT ON THE CONSOLIDATED NATURAL RESOURCES ACT (S.2739)

MR. WARNER. Mr. President, I rise today in support of the Consolidated Natural Resources Act (S. 2739). This omnibus package includes language that is especially important to my state, as well as the nation. Amongst other things, S. 2739 would designate some of America's most historic and beautiful lands as national heritage areas, including the area along Route 15 in Virginia. Known as The Journey Through Hallowed Ground, this effort has been championed by myself, my good friend Congressman Frank Wolf and Senator Jim Webb. I thank them for all their efforts on behalf of this legislation.

As my colleagues are aware, national heritage areas are intended to encourage residents, government agencies, non-profit groups and private partners to collaboratively plan and implement programs and projects to recognize, preserve and celebrate many of America's defining landscapes. Today, there are 37 national heritage areas spread out across the United States.

In Virginia, we are lucky enough to have a landscape that is worthy of the recognition and celebration that a national heritage area designation would afford it. Stretching through four states, and generally following the path of the Old Carolina Road (today's Route 15), the proposed Journey Through Hallowed Ground National Heritage Area is home to some of our nation's greatest historic, cultural and natural treasures. The region's riches read like a star-studded list of American history: Monticello, Montpelier, Manassas, Gettysburg. The list goes on. In all, there are 15 national historic landmarks, 47 historic districts, a number of presidential homes and the largest collection of Civil War battlefields in the country. It is an area, literally, where America happened.

With basic, technical assistance from the National Park Service, this proposed heritage area would be managed by The Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership, a non-profit entity whose sole purpose is to trumpet the magnificence of the Hallowed Ground's offerings. Already, the partnership has provided opportunities for thousands of visitors to enjoy the region's spectacular natural and historical resources, and they have worked hard to get this area the designation and recognition it deserves.

Now, before I conclude, I would like to take a quick moment to address several of the arguments voiced by critics against national heritage areas. First and foremost among these arguments, is that national heritage areas infringe upon private property rights. Mr. President, this simply is not accurate. As the Government Accountability Office (GAO) noted in testimony to the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, "National heritage areas do not appear [to affect] private property rights" (GAO-04-593T). Furthermore, as an example that they don't, I offer up the state of Tennessee, in its entirety, which today is designated a national heritage area and has had no intrusion on property rights. And, lastly, I point to language in this legislation that I specifically put in to ensure that no intrusion on property rights occurred. It states, in some detail,

that “nothing in this subtitle abridges the rights of any property owner.”

Other criticisms include concerns about the costs of heritage areas, and also that heritage areas increase the role of the federal government. To the issue of costs, I note that heritage areas provide a way for the federal government to highlight our nation’s historical, cultural and natural resources without having to actually own and maintain them - which, as we know by the current maintenance backlogs in the park system, are quite costly to the American taxpayer. Secondly, I’d like to remind my friends that often heritage areas require a funding match before a single federal dollar can be appropriated. This is the case for the heritage area which I come to champion today - The Journey Through Hallowed Ground. Every taxpayer dollar that is appropriated to The Journey Through Hallowed Ground must be matched equally by non-federal entities.

As for the other criticism, that heritage areas increase the role of the federal government and impose upon state and local governments, I note that heritage areas require and provide exorbitant opportunity for state and local input. In fact, in forming the Hallowed Ground, the local coordinating entity sought and received support from every local city, county and town within the proposed heritage area. The governor and Virginia General Assembly, whom I sincerely thank, also supported this effort. I commend The Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership for reaching out to all these groups.

Mr. President, in conclusion, I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting this legislation, and I thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of The Journey Through Hallowed Ground.