

**Statement of
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Bureau of Land Management
Department of the Interior
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
S. 1559, the San Juan Islands National Conservation Area Act
March 22, 2012**

Thank you for the invitation to testify on S. 1559, the San Juan Islands National Conservation Area Act. The Department of the Interior supports S. 1559 and urges Congress to move swiftly to designate Washington State's San Juan Islands as a National Conservation Area (NCA). Secretary of the Interior Salazar has made several trips to the San Juan Islands, most recently in February of this year, and has heard from local citizens about their strong support for protecting this special place. The Secretary's November 2011 *Preliminary Report to Congress on BLM Lands Deserving Protection as National Conservation Areas, Wilderness or Other Conservation Designations* highlighted the San Juan Islands NCA as a proposal deserving Congress' prompt attention.

Background

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) currently administers nearly 1,000 acres of the proposed NCA land in the San Juan Islands of Puget Sound, Washington. These lands include portions of a few large islands and over 50 small islands, rocks, pinnacles, and outcroppings. These islands have been molded and shaped through tens of thousands of years of glacial forces.

Anglers, hikers, and wildlife watchers are all attracted to the diverse and abundant biological resources of the islands. BLM lands in the San Juan Islands include forests, sandy beaches, woodlands, grasslands, and wetlands. Bald eagles and peregrine falcons are among the many species of birds that soar above the landscape, while orcas, porpoises, and other marine mammals ply the waters. The proposed NCA is not only biologically complex, but also culturally diverse. Two historic lighthouses built in the late 19th century are included in the proposed NCA, as are several archaeological sites of the Coast Salish people who have walked these lands for the last 12,000 years.

S. 1559

S. 1559 would designate the lands administered by the BLM within the San Juan Islands as a NCA. Each of the NCAs designated by Congress and managed by the BLM is unique. For the most part, however, they have certain critical elements, which include withdrawal from the public land, mining, and mineral leasing laws; off-highway vehicle use limitations; and language that charges the Secretary of the Interior with allowing only those uses that further the purposes for which the NCA is established. Furthermore, NCA designations should not diminish the protections that currently apply to the lands. Section 4 of S. 1559 honors these principles, and the BLM supports the proposed NCA designation.

The BLM would like the opportunity to work with the Sponsor and the Committee on a modification to the map and related bill language to ensure that all rocks and islands managed by the BLM within the San Juan Islands are included within the NCA.

Finally, S. 1559 establishes an Advisory Council to advise the Secretary and the BLM on preparation and implementation of a management plan. We support this provision, which recognizes the important role that the local citizens have played, and will continue to play, in the conservation of these lands. A wide-ranging group of local residents, stakeholders, and enthusiasts have joined with Senator Cantwell, Senator Murray, and Representative Larsen to support permanent protection for the BLM-administered lands in the San Juan Islands. Today's hearing is the culmination of those efforts.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of S. 1559, the San Juan Islands National Conservation Area Act. The Department urges Congress' swift passage of the bill.