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Guest column: Anniversary of the rivers law is cause to celebrate



This photo shows the Deschutes River in an area upstream of Bend. (Ryan Brennecke/Bulletin file photo)

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In the 1960s, the era of building massive dams in America was in full swing. Some 70,000 large dams had been built on virtually every major river, and hundreds more were proposed regardless of their economic worthiness or their unintended but harmful effects on fish, wildlife, recreation, landowners and the environment.

Rising against this backdrop of gung-ho development, Congress passed the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968 with unanimous support in the Senate and with a bipartisan 265-7 vote in the House. Seeking balance of federal policies that for a

century had encouraged development at any cost, the law recognized that some of our finest natural streams should remain the way they are.

For selected rivers, the program bans dams or other federal projects harmful to the streams, and it encourages protection of fish, wildlife, water quality and other values. Intending to go beyond the initial eight major designated rivers — which included Oregon's Rogue — the act set the stage for adding rivers to the program. Today, as we near the 50th anniversary of this program, nearly 300 designated rivers have been enrolled.

The Deschutes was one of these. In the largest set of additions, Republican Sen. Mark Hatfield's bill of 1988 included this river and 52 others flowing largely through public land across Oregon. In three sections, the Deschutes is designated for a total of 170 miles — the eighth-longest Wild and Scenic mileage in the nation. Key Deschutes tributaries were enrolled in this premier federal program for safeguarding rivers: the White River, Metolious, Little Deschutes, Crooked, North Fork Crooked, Whychus Creek, Big Marsh Creek, and Crescent Creek.

Hatfield's bill was too late to stop Round Butte Dam on the lower Deschutes. It was built even though the Federal Power Commission's permit for the dam was opposed by the state of Oregon, which wanted to spare the salmon and steelhead that once migrated and spawned far up the Deschutes and its stellar tributaries. But the Wild and Scenic designation came in time to prevent further damming, and Hatfield's bill set the stage for better management of recreation that was booming in popularity. The national prestige also bolstered efforts to protect stream-front open space, to reinstate healthier flows in diverted sections of the river, and to develop trails and public access that now set this local showcase apart as one of the finest river recreation corridors in the West.

The Deschutes has become the centerpiece to Bend as the city made its transition from a logging and mill town to a spot of recreation activity, a destination for travelers nationwide and a magnet for new residents seeking the best that the modern West has to offer.

The upcoming anniversary of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is a cause to celebrate the legacy of all who have worked for the health of America's finest rivers, including the Deschutes. Perhaps most important, the national recognition through this federal law—enacted nearly fifty years ago—can inspire all to engage further in ongoing efforts aimed at protecting and restoring this great waterway.

— *Tim Palmer*