

Opinion

Guest Opinion: Southern Oregon needs its wild and scenic rivers

By Tim Palmer

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This year marks the 50th anniversary of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, and that milestone of federal legislation presents a good opportunity to appreciate what we have here in southern Oregon and to redouble our efforts to keep these extraordinary assets intact.

Our region plays prominently in the Wild and Scenic story, as the Rogue was one of the initial eight rivers enrolled in this prestigious program in 1968. Already recognized as a classic river trip and legendary fishery throughout the West, the Rogue may well have ranked at the very top of the list when resource managers nationwide evaluated which rivers warranted protection the most.

Supporting the Rogue, commercial fishing guides and drift boaters banded together, meeting at Illahe Lodge in the lower canyon to back the designation as a way of banning Copper Canyon Dam, once proposed to block the stream below the mouth of the Illinois River — a plan that would have spelled ruin for both rivers' magnificent runs of salmon and steelhead. Local enthusiasts enlisted the support of young Senator Mark Hatfield, who joined with Senator Frank Church of Idaho to craft the landmark legislation. Fundamental to its passage was the issue of balance in our regard to rivers and natural resources: 70,000 dams had been built on virtually every major river in America and thousands more were proposed, planned, or under construction. Authors of the Act recognized that without a program setting aside our best remaining streams, little of natural value would be left for future generations.

With bipartisan leadership from Oregon's lawmakers, the coming years saw the addition of the Illinois River in 1984. Then came the North Fork Smith in Oregon along with adjacent northern California rivers in 1981. The Chetco, upper Rogue near Crater Lake, and Elk were added in 1988. Oregon's wild reaches of the Klamath were designated and spared from hydropower diversions in 1994, and additions to the Elk were passed in 2009. The result is that southwest Oregon and

northern California now have the greatest concentration of Wild and Scenic Rivers in America. No place else has our abundance and quality of pristine water along with wild shorelines and surviving salmon and steelhead, plus stellar river-running opportunities.

National protection means that new dams cannot be built. This provision alone spared the lower Rogue and also the Illinois, where a separate dam was proposed. The law also bars federal permits for projects such as hydropower diversions — once slated to desiccate the upper Klamath between Boyle Dam and the state boundary. Further, the Act requires that management plans be prepared to address how the rivers' outstanding qualities can effectively be managed. Federal regulation of land use is not allowed, so local government initiative is encouraged to keep major developments off flood plains. Federal land along designated rivers and within their basins is to be managed in ways that safeguard water quality, fisheries, and the rivers' other gifts to us all.

Wild and Scenic status has served our region well. These rivers are not only our source of drinking water but the essential arteries of our recreation and tourism industries and of our sport and commercial fisheries. With these rivers and their wild corridors, all of us have nationally outstanding opportunities for fishing, paddling, hiking, hunting, and escape to the natural world right here near our own backyards.

The 50th anniversary of this innovative program is a good time to not just appreciate the foresight of those who stepped up to protect these rivers when it counted, but also to renew our efforts to steward these rivers into the future. Plans under consideration for logging where fires have occurred, for example, need to safeguard the rivers that underpin so much that is good about living in southern Oregon. And our Wild and Scenic Rivers should be permanently protected from mining — a task that remains undone.

Today we owe a debt of gratitude to an earlier generation that assured the Rogue, Illinois, Klamath, and other streams would continue to flow free. Likewise, Oregonians of tomorrow will thank our own generation if we pass-on an inheritance of rivers, streams, and watersheds that highlight the best of southern Oregon.

Tim Palmer of Port Orford is the author of "Wild and Scenic Rivers: An American Legacy," "Field Guide to Oregon Rivers" and other books. See his work at www.timpalmer.org.