

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF D. REID WILSON
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CONSERVATION TRUST FOR NORTH CAROLINA
HEARING ON H.R. 4524, THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY PROTECTION ACT
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS OF
THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
FEBRUARY 25, 2010

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today. My name is Reid Wilson, and I am the Executive Director of the Conservation Trust for North Carolina, based in Raleigh. CTNC works to increase the amount of protected natural lands in our beautiful state. We do this in two ways. First, we represent, promote and assist 24 local land trusts, so that they can protect more land in the communities they serve. Second, we are a land trust ourselves, and we focus on conserving the natural and scenic corridor of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

I present my testimony on behalf of several other local land trusts that do excellent work to protect lands along the Parkway – Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust, Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina, High Country Conservancy, Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, and Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, all in North Carolina, and Western Virginia Land Trust in Virginia.

The Conservation Trust for North Carolina has protected over 30,000 acres along the Blue Ridge Parkway in 39 locations. Properties we've conserved include the 17,000-acre watershed that supplies drinking water for the city of Asheville, and the 8,000-acre watershed for the town of Waynesville. CTNC over the years has protected and conveyed 18 properties (all but two of them donated) totaling 1,321 acres to the National Park Service, and these lands have been added to the boundaries of the Parkway. We appreciate the close working relationship we have with the excellent staff at the Blue Ridge Parkway.

We strongly support the Blue Ridge Parkway Protection Act, H.R. 4524, introduced by Representatives Shuler, Price, Boucher and Perriello, and S. 2951, introduced by Senators Burr, Hagan, Webb and Warner. These bills would provide much-needed funding to help ensure that the Parkway is as awe-inspiring to future generations as it is to us today.

Let me tell you why it is critically important to expand funding for land conservation along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

- First, the Blue Ridge Parkway is the most visited unit of the National Park Service, but its most popular features are under constant threat.
- Second, the Parkway is the economic lifeblood of nearby mountain communities.
- Third, the Parkway is an incredible natural resource with rich and diverse wildlife habitat.

- Fourth, right now is an outstanding time to buy land along the Parkway.
- Fifth, the Parkway will celebrate its 75th anniversary this year.

Let me take each point in turn.

The Parkway is a national treasure. Its 469 miles of spectacular vistas, mature forests, pristine streams and hiking trails attract nearly 20 million visitors per year to North Carolina and Virginia. Yet the Parkway is an extremely fragile ribbon, and its scenic, cultural, and natural integrity are threatened by development. In most places, the Parkway's land corridor is only 800 feet wide, and most of the property that makes up its views is privately owned, vulnerable to development at a moment's notice.

In recent years, unplanned rampant growth along the Parkway has denuded forests, choked streams with silt, destroyed wildlife habitat, and ruined scenery with new subdivisions, roads, and shopping centers. In a survey, over 80 percent of Parkway visitors said that the main reason they visit is to see the vistas. The survey also found that if scenic quality declines, 22 percent of North Carolina respondents and 26 percent of Virginia respondents would reduce their number of visits to the Parkway. Many said they would not return at all.

Clearly, people travel to the Parkway to see the views. The best way to protect those vistas is to conserve the lands that comprise them.

Second, the Parkway is one of the strongest economic engines in the region, providing \$2.3 billion per year to local communities. Visitors spend between \$149 and \$172 per person per day at the Parkway. Clearly, protecting the Blue Ridge Parkway is critical to future economic growth in neighboring communities. The growing tourism industry depends on a healthy Parkway. The furniture and textile industries have been hit hard in the mountains. Those jobs are gone, and aren't coming back. We can't afford to allow the tourism industry to suffer the same fate as manufacturing, so we must conserve the Parkway – the backbone of tourism in this region.

Let me give you a couple of examples that show how fundamental the Parkway is to economic growth for dozens of towns up and down its length. Whenever a section of the Parkway is temporarily closed for repairs or by snow, the Parkway receives numerous anxious phone calls from inn and restaurant owners. They want to know how soon the road will be reopened because their businesses are taking a hit. Imagine if 10 percent or 20 percent fewer visitors came to the Parkway each year. We know from the Park Service survey that declines of that magnitude could take place if the views alone were degraded. This would devastate local businesses -- outfitters, restaurants, guides, attractions, inns and hotels -- that depend on tourists.

Or take the Orchard at Altapass. This historic apple orchard and general store sits adjacent to the Parkway about an hour north of Asheville. It's a hub of activity in spring,

summer and fall. It's a place where locals come to clog to live music, visit with their friends from neighboring hollows, purchase from among 75 varieties of delicious apples, and grab an ice cream cone when it's hot. It's a place where tourists flock, especially in the fall, to see stunning views of mountain foliage from the store's patio. On one weekend alone last fall the orchard had 6,000 visitors. I can guarantee you that those numbers would have been cut by half or more, had the views been developed. Fortunately, CTNC helped broker a deal with the landowner, CSX Railroad, and the state of North Carolina that placed a conservation easement on nearly 1,500 acres adjacent to the orchard. Not only will the views be protected forever, but so will jobs at the orchard and in nearby tourism-dependent towns such as Spruce Pine and Little Switzerland.

Third, the Parkway contains important natural areas that should be protected and expanded. The Parkway is home to the headwaters of 15 watersheds and contains some 600 miles of pristine streams. Protecting water at the source means that downstream communities pay less to supply clean drinking water to their residents. The Parkway also contains 43 species of amphibians, over 1600 species of plants, and nine federally listed threatened or endangered species. Juxtaposed with those numbers is the number of the Parkway's adjacent landowners – roughly 4,500. The Parkway has surveyed the 29 counties to determine what plans they have for development, and based on that, believes that development will become an even more pressing problem in the years to come. Adding more acres to the Parkway would ensure that wildlife habitat is protected and not fragmented.

Fourth, this bill is urgently needed due to the effects of the recession. For one thing, there is less state funding available for conservation projects on the Parkway. And, on the flip side, there is more land available to conserve, for less money, due to falling real estate prices and distressed properties coming onto the market. For instance, CTNC was able to purchase a 534-acre conservation property at a discount at the very end of 2008. And, we're currently negotiating with a bank to purchase a foreclosed property. We have an outstanding opportunity to buy Parkway land, but it won't last indefinitely. While development has slowed during the recession, its pace was furious before then, and will no doubt pick up again with the economy. There's no time to waste.

Fifth, the Parkway is celebrating its 75th anniversary in 2010, culminating in September. Passage of the Blue Ridge Parkway Protection Act and appropriation of funding would be a fitting way to mark the anniversary of this hugely popular but chronically underfunded jewel of the national parks system.

Seventy-five years ago, the United States faced an economic crisis much like the one we're in today. Rather than lock away its money, the federal government invested – funding public works programs that not only put hundreds of thousands of people to work, but created, protected and promoted some of the nation's best-loved places, including the Blue Ridge Parkway. The Parkway has been an unqualified success. Continued federal investment in the Parkway is a must to assure that it will thrive for generations to come.

Fortunately, North Carolina and Virginia lawmakers have taken the lead on legislation to help save the Blue Ridge Parkway's majestic views and natural areas. I want to thank Representatives Shuler, Price, Boucher and Perriello, and Senators Burr, Hagan, Warner and Webb for their leadership in introducing the Blue Ridge Parkway Protection Act. This legislation is desperately needed because a lack of funding has been a critical barrier to protecting the Parkway's forests, streams and vistas.

The bill is straightforward. Here are the highlights.

- It would authorize \$75 million over five years, beginning in FY 2010-11, to purchase fee simple properties and conservation easements along the Parkway, towards a goal of protecting an additional 50,000 acres.
- All transactions would be done with willing landowners. Nothing would be taken by eminent domain claims.
- The Blue Ridge Parkway's Land Protection Plan, which is revised regularly, would guide decisions about which properties are the highest priority to be preserved. Only properties listed in the Land Protection Plan would be eligible to receive funding.
- Any lands or easements purchased would have to be adjacent to the Parkway.
- The bill would enable the Park Service to work in partnership with non-profit conservation organizations to conserve priority properties. Usually these land trusts can move more quickly than the federal government to purchase a property or easement. The land trusts could buy the land or easement, hold it, protect it and manage it until the Park Service could supply funding to the land trust. The bill would ensure that these non-profits are reimbursed by the government after purchasing the properties or easements on behalf of the Park Service.
- No purchase would be made over appraised value.
- All fee simple purchases would be conveyed to the National Park Service and added to the Parkway's boundaries as soon as feasible. All properties with conservation easements would continue in private ownership, and easements would be held, monitored and enforced by a land trust, the National Park Service or an appropriate state agency -- whichever approach is preferred by the Park Service.

Passage of this bill and subsequent appropriations would constitute a critical investment in the Blue Ridge Parkway's scenic, natural, and cultural vitality, and in the future economic well-being and quality of life of North Carolina and Virginia. Although the funds provided by the Blue Ridge Parkway Protection Act would not be used for traditional brick and mortar projects, they would provide a long-term stimulus for small businesses throughout the Blue Ridge Mountains to maintain jobs that depend on tourism.

We understand that the National Park Service has some concerns about the bill as drafted, specifically about the mechanism for providing the funding for specific properties. From my conversations with the staff of the bill's lead sponsors, it is clear that there is a strong desire to work with the Park Service to resolve these issues and improve the overall bill.

CTNC and other land trusts that work along the Parkway are similarly eager to work toward language that is acceptable to all.

We all share a sense of responsibility to pass on to future generations clean rivers and streams, abundant wildlife habitat, ample opportunities to enjoy the outdoors, and a sound economy -- in short, a high quality of life. The Blue Ridge Parkway Protection Act would help achieve all of those goals for those who come after us.

I respectfully urge you to pass this important legislation and to work with the Appropriations Committee to secure funding in the FY 2010-11 budget and beyond. Our nation faces extraordinary budget constraints, but - as it did 75 years ago - this relatively small investment will save a treasured landscape at bargain prices and ensure that jobs are created and maintained in a region of the country with chronic high unemployment.

Thank you, and I'd be happy to answer any questions.