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CONTACT: Jerry Burkot
202-225-3452

RAHALL: INCLUDE MERCER COUNTY IN NEW RIVER PARKWAY PLANS

Washington, D.C. -- U.S. Rep. Nick Rahall (D-WV) today strongly endorsed extending the New River Parkway into Mercer County. Rahall is seeking to place the southern terminus of the Parkway at the I-77 interchange near Athens.

"The Parkway will promote recreational tourism, as well as industrial and economic development for southern West Virginia, something that is desperately needed as we attempt to diversify our economic base," Rahall said. Rahall has already been successful in adding a funding provision for the Parkway to a highway program reauthorization bill being considered on the House floor. The provision would provide \$17.6 million in federal funds for the project.

In a letter to William Brezinski, chairman of the New River Parkway Authority, Rahall wrote, "I would like to strongly endorse the concept of extending the proposed terminus of the Parkway at Pipestem State Park to the Athens interchange on I-77 in Mercer County. This would provide for Interstate access to the Parkway at both ends (I-64 and I-77) and thereby facilitate tourism and recreational opportunities and more widely distribute the economic benefits of the Parkway."

Rahall added that he views the Mercer County terminus of the Parkway as a way to get improvements made on Route 20, a major access route to Princeton as well as a means to bring increased business to the city.

Rahall envisions Mercer County as being a crucial link in the New River Parkway system. "The New River National River is a unit of the National

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Park system and I have proposed to designate a portion of the Bluestone River as a national wild and scenic river under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. Under this proposal, the segment of the river from its confluence with Bluestone Lake through Pipestem State Park to the vicinity of Eads Mill in Mercer County would be so designated," Rahall said. "This would provide further justification for extending the Parkway into Mercer County by linking two areas in which the National Park Service manages.

Rahall said he will work with Mercer County officials on the New River Parkway proposal as well as with landowners interested in conserving the Bluestone gorge.