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WEST VIRGINIA'S NATIONAL INTEREST RIVERS

By U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall

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It was during the autumn of 1978. Earlier that year I along with Rep. Harley Staggers senior had introduced in the House of Representatives legislation to establish the New River Gorge National River. In the Senate, West Virginia's Jennings Randolph and Robert C. Byrd were sponsoring an identical bill. And now, in October, we sat in a joint House-Senate committee hearing on our proposal. Testifying was James H. Watkins III of Beckley, chairman of the Coalition To Save The New River.

"By passing this legislation the Congress has a unique opportunity, no new free flowing streams are being created while more and more streams are being inundated with impoundments," he stated. "You have the opportunity to protect one of God's most unique and increasingly rare creations, a free flowing stream."

This statement lodged itself deep into my mind and has remained there during the intervening years. Our New River legislation was enacted into law and the park established. But the unique opportunity James Watkins had described had not been, in my view, completely fulfilled. For deep in the bowls of our New River bill we had planted a small seedling of an idea-- the study of the Gauley and Bluestone Rivers for protective status. That seedling has sprouted. It has been nourished. And now it is time for the harvest.

Early next year I will introduce into the 100th Congress the "West Virginia National Interest River Conservation Act of 1987." Under this legislation, the Gauley River National Recreation Area would be created and West Virginia's first national wild and scenic rivers would be established on the lower Bluestone and Meadow Rivers.

This will be a historic legislative initiative for our State. These tributaries of the New River possess outstanding features of national significance and should be preserved and enhanced for the benefit of present and future generations. Enactment of this legislation will also complete a system of protected river units in southern West Virginia that will compliment the region's existing state parks as well as the New River Gorge National River. We will, in fact, have created a network of natural, cultural, scenic and recreational wonders unsurpassed in their raw beauty anywhere in the East.

As with any serious legislative effort, one of the keys to success is to formulate a consensus bill. We are still fine-tuning the proposal and will probably continue doing so after its introduction. The process is just beginning and it will take a great deal of dedication to gain final enactment of this initiative. But the ultimate goal is well worth having.

T.S. Eliot, in "The Dry Salvages," wrote: "I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river is a strong brown god--sullen, untamed and intractable, patient to some degree..." He was right. The river is patient only to some

degree. It is unlikely it will remain "untamed" forever without our help. In this endeavor your active support during the legislative process is important. As for myself, I will continue to bear in mind James Watkins' words of wisdom. "You have the opportunity to protect one of God's most unique and increasingly rare creations, a free flowing stream."