

April 30, 2004

The Honorable James M. Inhofe
Chair
Environment and Public Works Committee
United States Senate
410 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable James M. Jeffords
Ranking Member
Environment and Public Works Committee
United States Senate
456 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Apalachicola Bay and Riverkeepers, Inc. Urges Passage of S.2169 – Restore the Apalachicola River Ecosystem (RARE) Act

Dear Chairman Inhofe and Senator Jeffords:

Apalachicola Bay and Riverkeeper, Inc. strongly supports S.2169, the Restore the Apalachicola River Ecosystem Act, and urges you to pass the bill out of committee this Congress. This bill will help protect and restore the Apalachicola River, and ensure that tax dollars are used wisely on an economically beneficial project rather than an unnecessary and environmentally harmful one.

The Apalachicola River System is a national treasure. The Apalachicola has been designated as a State of Florida Outstanding Florida Water, a National Estuarine Research Reserve by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and an International Biosphere Reserve by the United Nations. It is the highest priority water body recognized by the NW Florida Water Management District Surface Water and Improvement Program. Hundreds of millions of State of Florida dollars have been spent on land acquisition, conservation, education, and preservation to maintain the health of the Apalachicola ecosystem.

These significant expenditures are for good reason. The Apalachicola System supports one of, if not, the most productive river system in terms of biodiversity in North America. To mention a short list of its inhabitants: 360 marine mollusks (some endangered), 180 species of fresh and estuarine fish, 50 species of mammals, 1300 plant species (103 are threatened or endangered), 40 amphibian species (highest density in North America), and 80 species of reptiles.

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In addition to this magnificent diversity, the commercial and sport fisheries it supports drives an economic engine felt throughout the Gulf of Mexico and Southeastern United States. The Apalachicola River and floodplain are the biological factory fueling the Apalachicola Bay, which provides 90% of the oyster harvest in Florida and over 12% of the U.S. harvest. It supports the ecological balance of a significant area in the Gulf of Mexico as one of the primary nurseries for Gulf shrimp, finfish and blue crabs. The river and bay provide hundreds of commercial fishing, recreational fishing, and ecotourism jobs, and form the cornerstone of the economy of six Florida counties. One economic study measuring the natural capital provided by the free flowing Apalachicola estimated the yearly value at \$5,000,000,000.

It is with great dismay that we watch the Apalachicola being degraded by projects authorized by our own U.S Congress. Dredging and disposal activities along the River's banks being carried out by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) under the auspices of the U.S. Congress have buried 25 miles of the Apalachicola's banks and hundreds of acres of productive floodplain habitat. Sedimentation resulting from destabilization of the river channel isolates sloughs and tributaries from the main river, preventing the natural flow of water between the river and its floodplain until seasonal floods carry re-suspended sediments deep into the floodplain wetlands, where it smothers habitat and threatens a significant historical local Florida industry of Tupelo honey production.

This destruction is particularly senseless since the Apalachicola River sees virtually no commercial barge traffic, and the Corps has never achieved the authorized 9'x100' commercial barge channel for the mandated 95% of the year. The Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River System (ACF) is the nation's most expensive inland waterway measured on a barge-ton/mile cost. In 2000, when the nation was investing nearly \$5 million each year to maintain navigation, the Corps estimated that only 40 cents was returned to the nation for each federal dollar invested in the river. At that time, then Assistant Secretary of Civil Works of the Corps concluded that maintaining navigation on the Apalachicola was "not economically justified or environmentally defensible." Since then, commercial barge traffic on the River has declined. The last commercial barge company regularly using the Apalachicola River shut down in 2002. In FY2003 when the nation was spending \$6.5 million on maintaining navigation on the ACF, nine barges used the Apalachicola River.

It is our understanding that the Corps has a backlog of unfunded projects. Surely some of these would be cost effective and truly beneficial for the expenditure of the U.S. Taxpayers dollars. It is long past time to abandon these environmentally destructive efforts to maintain a navigation channel that has never been justified economically in over 40 years. Apalachicola Riverkeepers strongly supports S.2169, and we urge you to help ensure its passage during this Congress.

Sincerely,

David McLain
Executive Director
Apalachicola Bay and Riverkeeper, Inc.

cc: Members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee

