October 7, 2015

Dear Members of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources
United States House of Representatives
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Greater Yellowstone Coalition joins many business, recreation, conservation and outdoor enthusiast organizations in opposition to H.R. 974. The proposed amendments to this legislation do not address many of our key concerns and there are a number of very important reasons for our opposition to this shortsighted and dangerous measure. We have outlined below some of the issues that are driving the now widespread opposition to this legislation. We encourage you to ensure this legislation does not pass and does not become law.

Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks are crown jewels of America’s National Park System. The wildlife and stunning vistas found in these two parks attract visitors from around the world and inspire millions of people with their conservation legacies. Each new use or activity proposed inside Yellowstone should be carefully analyzed and weighed by biologists and National Park Service managers tasked with conserving this special place. Deference should always be given to protecting park resources. The Greater Yellowstone Coalition has always held that legislating new uses into national parks and tying the hands of local managers is not a sound way to steward Yellowstone and Grand Teton’s world famous lands, waters and wildlife. Establishing a precedent for legislating new uses into the nation’s national parks, specifically the first and most iconic park, opens the door to every activity that is currently not permitted in our most cherished places. There are continually new and innovative developments in the world of outdoor recreation. With this legislation as a precedent, what is to stop each new user group from asking Congress for access to national parks and other public lands?

Proponents of the bill have asserted that this measure does not take away the discretion of the National Park Service. The way the bill and proposed amendments are currently written, it directs the Secretary of the Interior to “promulgate regulations to allow the use of hand-propelled vessels...” It appears this language would indeed tie the hands of park service managers by forcing them to allow boating in Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks.

Congressional intervention on behalf of a single new use ignores highly controversial issues such as user conflicts, the need for new infrastructure at put-ins and take-outs, new costs associated with management and search and rescue, park service funding, and impacts to wildlife and their habitats. For these and other reasons, we oppose legislation that would mandate paddling in more areas of these two parks.
As you are aware, there are countless opportunities for outdoor and water-based recreation in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks have been managed under long-standing regulations that allow boating in many areas. The Snake River Comprehensive River Management Plan already proposes to provide paddling access to more than 300 miles – 86 percent – of rivers in and around Grand Teton. The National Park Service and National Elk Refuge have determined that maintaining a paddling closure on the remaining 14 percent is not only consistent with current law and policy, but also will provide for appropriate protections for sensitive park and refuge wildlife while ensuring a range of non-boating recreational experiences. In Yellowstone, only five of the park’s 168 lakes are closed to boating and there are limitless opportunities on a wide variety of waters immediately surrounding the park.

Cong. Lummis’s legislation is not the right mechanism to address recreational use in our national parks and would set a dangerous precedent. It is a blunt approach that fails to consider the existing recreational activities and natural values provided by waters in some of the world’s most iconic places – Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks. At a time when the National Park Service budget is already inadequate in addressing issues effecting visitor experience and safety, crumbling infrastructure, interpretation, invasive species, existing recreational uses and other pressing matters, placing a new use and management burden on our nation’s premiere park is not a prudent use of public resources. Much more pressing conservation issues exist in our region and there are far better uses of limited taxpayer resources in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Thank you for your consideration of our opposition to this legislation, H.R. 974, as you evaluate any stance you may take on this matter.

Sincerely,

Caroline Byrd
Executive Director
Greater Yellowstone Coalition