

**STATEMENT OF DAVID MIHALIC, SUPERINTENDENT, YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION, AND PUBLIC LANDS, OF THE HOUSE RESOURCES COMMITTEE, CONCERNING H. R. 3425, TO AUTHORIZE THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO STUDY THE SUITABILITY AND FEASIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING HIGHWAY 49 IN CALIFORNIA, KNOWN AS THE 'GOLDEN CHAIN HIGHWAY', AS A NATIONAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR.**

**December 13, 2001**

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's views on H. R. 3425. This bill would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to study the suitability and feasibility of establishing Highway 49 in California, known as the "Golden Chain Highway", as a National Heritage Corridor.

The Department supports this legislation, but will not consider requesting funding for the study in this or the next fiscal year so as to focus available time and resources on completing previously authorized studies. As of now, there are 41 authorized studies that are pending, and we only expect to complete a few of those this year. We caution that our support of this legislation authorizing a study does not necessarily mean that the Department will support designation of this National Heritage Area. The Administration is determined to eliminate the deferred maintenance backlog in national parks, but the costs of new parks or other commitments, such as grants for new National Heritage Areas, could divert funds from taking care of current responsibilities. Furthermore, in order to better plan for the future of our National Parks, we believe that any such studies should carefully examine the full life cycle operation and maintenance costs that would result from each alternative considered.

H. R. 3425 requires the National Park Service to complete a special resource study on the national significance, suitability, and feasibility of establishing Highway 49 in California as a National Heritage Corridor. The study would be done in consultation with affected local governments, the State of California, state and local historic preservation offices, community organizations, and the Golden Chain Council.

The bill would require the study to include an analysis of the significance of Highway 49 in California from the city of Oakhurst in Madera County to the city of Vinton in Plumas County.

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The study would examine the lands, structures, and cultural resources within the immediate vicinity of the highway, options for preservation and use of the highway, and options for interpretation of significant features associated with the highway. The bill would also require the study to examine alternatives for preservation of these resources by the private sector.

Highway 49 traverses the area where gold was discovered and mined during the California Gold Rush, and passes through the heart of an area that includes communities with many Gold Rush-related structures and sites. It is the principle route of travel linking these major Gold Rush sites, and provides access to numerous State Historic Parks and museums related to the Gold Rush.

The discovery of and search for gold in California transformed the nation. "Gold fever" was a national experience, spreading throughout the country and the world and precipitating a massive migration to California. The discovery of gold brought California into the United States as the 31<sup>st</sup> state, preparing the way for the United States to span the width of the North American continent, and accelerating the exploration and settlement of the American West. Legends and literature have expanded the reach of the Gold Rush story, through the work of nationally significant writers such as Mark Twain and Bret Harte.

The area along Highway 49 retains many Gold Rush-era resources, including two National Historic Landmark Districts in the towns of Columbia and Coloma, and numerous properties and districts that are included on the National Register of Historic Places. The State of California has recognized the significance of this area through the establishment of several State Historic Parks and mining museums, and designation of Highway 49 as a State heritage corridor and a State scenic highway. Many of the towns along Highway 49 retain much of their historic integrity, and have sought to preserve and promote their Gold Rush history.

As we have testified previously before this subcommittee, there are several steps we believe should be taken prior to Congress designating a national heritage area to help ensure that the heritage area is successful. Those steps are:

1. completion of a suitability/feasibility study;
2. public involvement in the suitability/feasibility study;
3. demonstration of widespread public support among heritage area residents for the

proposed designation; and

4. commitment to the proposal from the appropriate players which may include governments, industry, and private, non-profit organizations, in addition to the local citizenry.

The National Park Service has had some inquiries in the past year from historic preservation groups, non-profit organizations, and business groups seeking additional information about heritage areas in general and a possible Highway 49 Heritage Corridor. A study of the area would allow a determination of the level of support that might exist in the area and would help identify further protection and preservation options. A critical element of the study will be to evaluate the integrity of the resources and the nationally distinctive character of the region before recommending national heritage area designation.

We would suggest a technical amendment to clarify that the city of Vinton is located in Plumas County.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.