

## **The American Heritage Rivers Initiative**

**(Analysis, May 27, 1997)**

In his State of the Union Address, President Bill Clinton announced his American Heritage Rivers Initiative, in which he directed his Cabinet to "design an initiative to support communities in their efforts to restore and protect America's rivers." An interagency task force was formed, which included the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Energy, Interior, Justice, and Housing and Urban Development, the Environmental Protection Agency, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, Corps of Engineers, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The task force convened public meetings in eleven cities during the months of April and May which attracted a total of 690 participants, according to task force estimates. Federal Register notice of the initiative was published May 21, 1997, with comments to be received by June 9, at the Council on Environmental Quality.

"The initiative will create no new regulatory requirements for individuals or state and local government." The purpose of the initiative is to designate, by "Presidential Proclamation," ten rivers in 1997 which will receive special attention from the federal government in the form of (1) "enhanced services and program delivery to designated rivers; and (2) improved delivery of services and information." To implement the two components of the initiative, each designated river will be assigned a "River Navigator" for not more than a five-year term, whose responsibility will be to serve as a one-stop shopping center for all available federal services and benefits related to the designated river community(ies).

"The Administration believes that a successful initiative will be community-led, flexible, coordinated, broad, partnership-based, and action-oriented." Nominations for designation are to be submitted by the "local community" which may be either local governments or non-government organizations. Nominations will be screened by the interagency task force and recommended to the President who will make the designations. Nominations may consist of a single river community or an entire river or watershed. No more than 15 pages may be submitted in the nomination and must demonstrate compliance with the qualifying criteria:

- Broad Community Support
- Notable Resource Qualities
- Local and Regional Partnership Agreements
- Strategies That Lead to Actions
- Measurable Results

Among the benefits of designation, aside from the prestige of a "Presidential Proclamation," and the appointment of a "River Navigator," the designated rivers "will receive focused support in the form of programs and enhanced services...Individual program services will be simplified and expedited...flexibility from certain bureaucratic requirements in exchange for a commitment to

achieve ambitious performance-based goals. The Administration will encourage non-governmental organizations and other partners...to restore, protect, and revitalize American Heritage Rivers....

"During the first year, federal agencies will focus on improving service and program delivery to the designated river communities, but will also implement methods to improve information access and service delivery to all river communities."

The American Heritage Rivers Initiative is clearly an effort on the part of the Administration to encourage and expedite the implementation of the provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity and of Agenda 21's "Sustainable Communities" objectives. Although not yet ratified by the U.S. Senate, the Convention on Biological Diversity seeks to create a world-wide network of bioregions, using UNESCO's World Biosphere Reserve Network as the nucleus. Each Biosphere Reserve consists of core wilderness areas that are to be connected by corridors of wilderness. Rivers are a natural, and highly prized avenue for corridors of wilderness to connect the core areas. For example, the Conasauga and Ocoee Rivers in Tennessee and Georgia have been targeted by The Nature Conservancy and other NGOs for special designation to connect core wilderness areas within the Southern Appalachian Biosphere Reserve. The President's American Heritage Rivers Initiative will enhance and expedite the work already in progress in that region.

The initiative will also enhance and expedite the "Sustainable Communities" objectives of Agenda 21 in river communities. By holding out the carrot of federal funding assistance and "flexibility" in regulatory compliance, river communities are expected to be enticed into the snare of "commitments to achieve ambitious performance-based goals."

While assuring Congress and the American public that "no new regulatory requirements"

will be imposed, the federal government will avoid Congressional and public scrutiny of administrative policies which seek to achieve objectives established in the international community, that far exceed the legislative mandates for which those regulatory policies were authorized.

Finally, the American Heritage Rivers Initiative is another example of government by Presidential Proclamation, rather than government by, of, and for the people. Neither the sustainable communities initiative, nor the American Heritage Rivers Initiative are the result of a demand by local citizens. Instead, both are the result of United Nations declarations imposed in America by Executive Order and Presidential Proclamation. Private citizens, and the United States Congress still have the authority to limit Presidential power, though the political will to do so has not yet been demonstrated.

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