

Testimony by Congresswoman Louise Slaughter
House Natural Resources Subcommittee on
National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Hearing on H.R. 713, The Niagara Falls National Heritage Area Act
March 15, 2007
10:00 AM

Good morning and thank you to Chairman Grijalva and Ranking Member Bishop for holding today's hearing on H.R. 713, the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area Act. As the sponsor of H.R. 713, it is a pleasure to be here to share with you the bill's importance to New York's 28th Congressional District.

I also want to welcome Bob Emerson to Capitol Hill. Mr. Emerson is the Executive Director of Old Fort Niagara, which is the oldest continuously occupied military site in North America. Mr. Emerson is a strong proponent for creating a Niagara Falls National Heritage Area, and I am pleased that he has joined us this morning.

Every time I make the drive across my congressional district, I am reminded of how fortunate I am to represent a region with such a diverse geographic make-up. From the Ontario shoreline to the vast vineyards and apple orchards, Mother Nature has bestowed some of her finest treasures upon Western New York. But none are as recognized worldwide, and as deeply embedded in the public consciousness, as Niagara Falls. Niagara Falls is an international landmark, a natural wonder overwhelming in its splendor and magnitude. More than 15 million visitors from around the world come to Niagara Falls each year to take in this awe-inspiring natural phenomenon.

Yet few visitors to Niagara Falls understand or appreciate the region's immense contributions to the development of our nation. Niagara Falls is much more than a series of beautiful waterfalls. The Niagara frontier has significant historical ties to Native Americans, early European exploration, the French and Indian War, the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Underground Railroad. Around 1895, Niagara Falls became the leading source of hydroelectric power in the country, stimulating the development of heavy industry in Western New York.

The establishment of Niagara Falls as a National Heritage Area will strengthen the ties between its natural, historical, and cultural resources as a compelling narrative to share with the public. H.R. 713 will give Niagara Falls the federal resources and attention it needs to maintain its position as one of the natural wonders of the world.

Western New York has been very supportive of designating Niagara Falls a National Heritage Area since 2000, when community and elected officials first met with the National Park Service to discuss the concept. In 2002, Congress passed, and the President signed into law, the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area Study Act. This legislation directed the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study of the feasibility of establishing a Niagara Falls National Heritage Area. The National Park Service began work on the study in May 2003, and interviewed over 30 local stakeholders, state

agencies, local communities, historians, tourism interests, and business interests along the Niagara corridor.

The Niagara Falls National Heritage Area Study report, issued in November 2005, found that the Niagara region met the National Park Service's criteria for establishing a National Heritage Area. The majority of public comments on the Study expressed support for a National Heritage Area that includes Niagara Falls and a network of thematically-related sites in Niagara and Erie counties. The public strongly lined-up behind a management entity that would be run for the first five years by a federal commission, made up of a cross-section of public and private interest in Niagara Falls and New York State. The National Park Service formally recommended this vision for the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area on May 26, 2006. H.R. 713 mirrors the National Park Service's final recommendation.

H.R. 713 is critically important to the district I represent. With the steady decline in manufacturing, Western New York's economy has become increasingly dependent on tourism. In addition to recognizing Niagara Falls' significant role in our nation's development, H.R. 713 will help revitalize and strengthen Western New York's economy by creating a comprehensive strategy to promote our scenic and historical resources.

Niagara Falls has always been a source of pride for Western New York. I believe strongly that federal recognition of Niagara Falls is appropriate and long-overdue. I, therefore, respectfully request that the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands support H.R. 713 and send it to the full committee for its consideration.

Again, I want to thank Chairman Grijalva and Congressman Bishop for holding today's hearing and inviting me to testify on H.R. 713.