

SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS

1334 Longworth House Office Building

June 6, 2012

Legislative hearing on:

H.R. 5544, Minnesota Education Investment and Employment Act, To authorize and expedite a land exchange involving National Forest System land in the Laurentian District of the Superior National Forest and certain other National Forest System land in the State of Minnesota that has limited recreational and conservation resources and lands owned by the State of Minnesota in trust for the public

Testimony by U.S. Representative Chip Cravaack (MN-8)

Thank you chairman bishop and ranking member Grijalva for holding today's important legislative hearing.

And thank you very much for kindly inviting me to come testify on my bill, H.R. 5544 the Minnesota education investment and employment act.

This is an issue of great importance to all Minnesotans and most importantly to the educational future of Minnesota students.

When Minnesota became a state in 1858, sections 16 and 36 of every township were set aside in trust for the benefit of Minnesota students.

The state could use, lease, or sell the land to raise money for education.

Then, in the 1970s, the federal government created the boundary waters canoe area wilderness.

As a result these lands within the BWCAW cannot be logged, leased, or mined.

For far too long therefore – over 30 years in fact – Minnesota and its students have faced an 86,000 acre problem.

The school trust lands were locked within the borders of the boundary waters and were unable to produce critical funding for Minnesota public education.

It is imperative we resolve this long-standing problem. As a matter of fact we are constitutionally bound to do so.

Our goal is to preserve and protect the boundary waters and allow state-owned school trust lands to raise revenue for Minnesota education.

Minnesota law specifies these lands must earn money for the school trust. The state has a constitutional responsibility to earn a financial return from these lands to fund the education system.

Unfortunately, Minnesota school kids have been cheated out of public education funding for last 34 years now and it's past time to rectify this problem.

For the last several years, there have been a number of working groups, studies, and resolutions.

Finally after decades of inaction, stalling and dilatory tactics, republicans and democrats in Minnesota said enough is enough.

In March, an overwhelming majority made of democrats and republicans in the state senate passed senate file 1750 by a vote of 53-11. And then in April the house passed the bill 95 to 33. Shortly thereafter, our democratic governor Mark Dayton enacted the bill.

After hearing the strong message sent by our elected legislature and governor, I scrapped the original plan that I had developed and introduced H.R. 5544 to execute the bi-partisan state plan.

As such, H.R. 5544 would exchange state-owned school trust lands trapped in the BWCAW to the federal government in exchange for federal government-owned land outside the BWCAW.

Moreover, this includes important provisions that would ensure Minnesotans can maintain their existing rights to hunt and fish within the boundary waters.

In addition, this bill exempts the land exchange process from NEPA. This decision is supported by Minnesota department of natural resources commissioner Tom Landwehr.

While I generally support the aims of NEPA, in many areas, the state of Minnesota has higher environmental standards than the federal government.

Moreover, I trust our democratic governor Mark Dayton and state officials, working with the United States Forest Service to execute this exchange in a thoughtful, environmentally responsible manner.

Make no mistake, the state passed; bi-partisan land exchange is going to get done.

I will not allow special interest groups, acting in bad faith, to abuse the NEPA process and use frivolous lawsuits to block and derail this land exchange.

If I could trust special interest groups to act in good faith and if I could trust the federal bureaucracy to act promptly, I would include NEPA in this legislation. But history has shown us otherwise and our Minnesota school children can't wait any longer.

Currently, some schools in Minnesota have classrooms with over 40 kids and some school districts have been reduced to a four-day school week. That is not progress.

We are doing a disservice to Minnesota school kids and teachers in Minnesota classrooms.

This legislation will generate badly needed funding for our schools and create good paying jobs in Minnesota.

Importantly, the Minnesota education investment and employment act would not eliminate a single acre of boundary waters land.

In fact, it would add wilderness acres to the existing BWCAW boundaries, while giving Minnesota children land that rightfully belongs to them.

In close, I thank the U.S. forest service for their good suggestions and I am open to incorporating these recommendations during the mark-up process.

Again, thank you chairman bishop, ranking member Grijalva, and all members of the subcommittee for allowing me the opportunity to testify today.