

#9 ST. CROIX RIVER

MINNESOTA AND WISCONSIN

THREAT: COSTLY SUPERHIGHWAY BRIDGE

AT RISK: PROTECTION FOR WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS NATIONWIDE

PHOTO: NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Summary

The St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, one of our nation's original Wild and Scenic Rivers, provides a wealth of beautiful scenery, recreation opportunities for paddlers and anglers, and a haven for wildlife. However, a proposal to build a costly superhighway bridge would undermine the values that make the river a regional and national treasure – and set a dangerous precedent for other Wild and Scenic Rivers nationwide. Congress must oppose any legislation that revokes Wild and Scenic protections and creates a loophole for the expensive bridge, and the Governor of Minnesota must evaluate common-sense alternatives.

The River

The St. Croix River begins in northwest Wisconsin and flows south, forming the border of Minnesota and Wisconsin and joining the Mississippi River southeast of the Twin Cities. The St. Croix National Scenic Riverway was established in 1968 as one of the eight original Wild and Scenic Rivers and the lower section was designated four years later. The only Wild and Scenic river in Minnesota, the St. Croix provides a unique wilderness-like experience for outdoor recreation opportunities in a growing metropolitan area.

The Threat

For nearly 20 years, a four-lane highway bridge over the St. Croix River has been debated by federal and state agencies, local residents, and the courts. The existing Stillwater lift bridge has outlived its usefulness as a primary route for vehicles to cross the river in this location. Several proposals for a replacement bridge have been developed and evaluated over the years. Though the specifics have changed, a massive, four-lane bluff top highway bridge has consistently been the state transportation agencies' proposal, while more reasonably sized and less costly options were dismissed. The freeway-style alternative is currently estimated to cost Minnesota, Wisconsin, and federal taxpayers up to \$690 million dollars.



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In 2010, the National Park Service (NPS) reevaluated the bridge proposal and concluded that the massive bridge would have a “direct and adverse effect” on the St. Croix’s scenic and recreational values. Now, Representative Michele Bachmann has introduced legislation in Congress that would essentially roll back the river’s longstanding Wild and Scenic protections to allow construction of the costly bridge.



PHOTO: JIM DENHAM

If this legislation is enacted, it will not only result in construction of a bridge that will harm the St. Croix River and gouge taxpayers, it will also set a dangerous precedent for all Wild and Scenic Rivers under pressure from harmful development. In its more than 40-year history, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act has never been waived for a transportation project, or for any project of this magnitude.

What Must Be Done

Congress should reject any legislation that strips or weakens the river’s Wild and Scenic protections. Overriding a National Park Service determination in this manner could threaten the future of all Wild and Scenic Rivers.

There is widespread interest in the region by residents and conservation groups to develop an alternative to the massive freeway-style bridge. Alternative designs with less impact on the river and lower costs should be evaluated—particularly given the severe financial stress facing both states. The Governor of Minnesota should direct his Department of Transportation to develop a lower, slower, less intrusive

bridge design for the St. Croix that will meet the legitimate regional transportation needs while minimizing the adverse impacts on the river’s scenic and recreational values.

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UPPER PHOTO: STILLWATER LIFT BRIDGE, SRI DHANUSH
LOWER PHOTO: J. PELLGEN

