

House passes bill to protect Molalla River

By Charles Pope, The Oregonian

November 19, 2009, 11:47AM

WASHINGTON -- The House Thursday approved legislation that would extend the highest level of federal protection to 21.3 miles of Oregon's Molalla River.

The bill, which was sponsored by Rep. Kurt Schrader, D-Ore., sailed through the chamber by a 292-133 vote. All five members of Oregon's delegation voted for the bill. It now moves to the Senate where Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley have introduced an identical measure.



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The House voted Thursday to increase protection along 21.3 miles of the Molalla River. The measure now moves to the Senate where it has considerable support.

"The Molalla River is nothing short of a natural treasure," Schrader said in a statement after the vote.

"Not only are we preserving its awe-inspiring beauty for future generations but we are also bringing badly needed economic benefits to our region through increased tourism and recreational opportunities. More visitors to the area mean more business for local hotels, restaurants and recreational providers; and more business is exactly what Oregon needs right now," he said.

The bill provides federal protection and recognition of the Molalla River under the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. This system was created by Congress in 1968 to preserve certain rivers with outstanding natural, cultural and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations.

Schrader worked with a wide collection of interest groups to

structure the bill to maximize support. Among those supporting federal protections were national groups like American Rivers, local interests such as the Glen Avon Neighborhood Association, the Oregon State Police, the Native Fish Society and Clackamas County.

The Molalla River Alliance, which included 45 groups, also played a major role in building support for the effort.

"This designation is notable for helping to safeguard the special character of these rivers, while also recognizing the potential for their appropriate use and development. It encourages river management that crosses political boundaries and promotes public participation in developing goals for river protection," Schrader said.



Rep. Kurt Schrader

"It was exciting to see the Molalla River take center stage on the floor of Congress," said Erik Fernandez, wilderness coordinator for Oregon Wild, a group that has been involved in conservation initiatives across the state for years.

Like Schrader, Fernandez said the vote was significant for economic reasons as well as environmental.

"Locally this will protect the drinking water for the communities of Molalla and Canby and create a tourist draw for local businesses as this helps put Molalla on the map," he said.

--Charles Pope