

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Witness Statement

Presentation to the House Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Helen Chenoweth-Hage, Chair
Lessons for National Forests
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North Maine Woods Inc.
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INTRODUCTION

Thank you Chair Chenoweth-Hage and members of the committee for inviting us to participate in this hearing. My name is Albro Cowperthwaite and I have been the Executive Director for the North Maine Woods (NMW) organization for nearly 20 years. We take pride in our forest management program on 3.5 million acres of private and state owned land in northern Maine. You have our respect for your enormous role in managing our nation's forests. By participating in this hearing, we hope our experience in managing public use of forests in Maine will provide useful information and insight.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC OWNERSHIP

The current ownership pattern of the North Maine Woods is complicated due in part to the historical events of the last two centuries. In about 1783, Maine and Massachusetts were one state and the area that is now Northern Maine was divided into six-mile square townships and sold at auction. By the time it became a separate state in 1820, over half of Maine (10 Million acres) had been sold or granted. The remainder of the land was sold by 1878. In many cases, two or three people jointly purchased in common, and undivided, one or more townships. Over the years, additional heirs of those original buyers have further diversified ownership. An heir might own an undivided 15% of the whole township, that is 15% of every tree, rock, road, etc.

Beginning around the turn of the century, some of the family owners began to sell their holdings to industrial landowners. Industrial ownership increased during the 20th century while at the same time the remaining family ownerships were divided into smaller shares with each succeeding generation. Today ownership is now a combination of private individual, private industrial and public interests. The complicated ownership by township is further compounded, as there are 150 townships within the NMW management area. This diversified ownership pattern is the primary reason for the NMW organization.

ORIGINATION

Conflicts

In the 1960s, log drives were ending in Maine and access road systems were expanding to move harvesting crews and wood products. As a result of improved access, there was a significant increase in recreational traffic as more people took to the woods to hunt, fish and camp. In response to these new pressures of public use, individual landowners began to place control gates along property lines.

Unmanned gates were also constructed as a part of a requirement by the State of Maine to keep the number of access points to the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, part of the Wild and Scenic River Program, to a minimum. Other gates were erected at the request of U.S. Customs and Immigration to prohibit travelers from using the private road network for illicit use between Maine and Quebec. During the 1970s many unmanned, locked gates restricted travel within the interior of the area.

Due to budget problems in the late 1960's, the campsite program operated by the Maine Forest Service experienced cutbacks. State employees no longer managed popular public campsites on much of Maine's private land. Landowners were forced to decide whether to disallow camping or take on the responsibility for campsite maintenance on their own.

Resolution

The concept of NMW evolved from a landowner committee organized in the mid-1960s to resolve differences between logging contractors over use and maintenance of the private road system. This same group also dealt with public traffic and parking issues until it was necessary to establish a separate committee to deal with public use.

From the formation of NMW in 1971, and over the next twenty-eight years, landowners became more comfortable with the management program and most interior gates were removed. Regulation rather than gates controlled the number of access points to the Allagash Wilderness Waterway and limited illicit travel to and from Canada. Today travel is possible throughout the entire area with only a few restrictions.

In addition to the removal of interior gates, landowners and state agencies were able to provide recreational users with one set of uniform regulations and fees for the entire land base. Users were no longer required to obtain several permits or pay different user fees to many separate landowners.

Growth

The NMW area experienced two expansions. In 1985, the size of the managed area increased from 2.5 to 2.8 million acres following the request of neighboring landowners to join the organization. In 1999, acreage increased to 3.5 million acres following a request by other neighbors. These expansions have resulted in more unmanned locked gates being eliminated to allow the public the ability to travel freely throughout fifty six hundred square miles of forest. Through economies of scale, these expansions also provided for cost efficiencies and we were able to decrease user fees in the year 2000.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Since 1971 forest landowner representatives and state agency personnel have served on the board of directors and various NMW committees. Campsite Committee members provide guidance on campsite maintenance and development. Public Relations Committee members help develop brochures and other

public information resources. St. John River Committee members assure that the 100-mile canoe trip is managed according to a state approved long-range plan. The Administrative Committee oversees budgets, operations and finances.

The staff consists of 5 year round professionals and 55 seasonal positions. Full time staff consist of the Executive Director, Office Manager, Field Manager, Commercial Use Manager and Checkpoint Operations Manager. Approximately 43 seasonal people work as checkpoint receptionists and 12 maintain and develop campsites. A majority of seasonal staff members are retirees from other professions who work from May to November. This force of mature employees is one of the strong points of our management program. Most have already acquired the ability to deal with the public, which makes them excellent employees for this type of organization.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Public Assistance

Receptionists are stationed at 17 checkpoints at convenient hours, some 24 hours a day, to greet visitors. They provide information, road directions and copies of rules and regulations. They give visitors maps, brochures and trash bags to help control litter in the area. Receptionists also assist parties in emergencies and provide information to State Game Wardens looking for sportsmen in emergency situations. Today over 115,000 visitors use the area every year for a total of nearly 300,000 visitor days.

Forest Fire Prevention

The Authorized Campsite Program, verbal fire safety reminders from receptionists and entry logs kept at checkpoints reduce the threat of manmade fires. In the past 28 years there is no record of a forest fire ever starting from public camping fires on properties managed by NMW. The occurrences of arson have been minimal- records are kept of visitors entering and leaving the property. As a service to the Maine Forest Service, many checkpoints report weather conditions daily in order to develop Maine's daily fire danger index. Due to reductions in state agency staffing, checkpoints are the only facilities in many remote areas that are manned seven days a week to report the weather.

Security

Once through a checkpoint, visitors have access to 3.5 million acres. Even in such a large area, landowners, foresters, logging contractors and camp owners know that visitors have registered and they know there is less chance of theft or vandalism of property, equipment or forest products. As a further deterrent, NMW also offers a \$500 reward for any information that leads to the conviction of anyone committing theft or vandalism. Information retained at checkpoints also assists state game wardens in finding people in case of emergency in over five hundred thousand square miles of forest.

Trash and Solid Waste

Sportsmen and sportswomen, forest workers and landowners do not have to look at or deal with the refuse of others. NMW has a Carry In-Carry Out program and visitors are expected to help keep the area clean. You will rarely find discarded tires, stoves, refrigerators, and mattresses, auto batteries or abandoned vehicles. Receptionists know who enters the property and this alone discourages illegal dumping. It is common knowledge that solid waste is a major problem for landowners in other parts of Maine.

Improved Wildlife Management

Through cooperative efforts with Maine's Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, a computerized visitor use program was developed so visitor use statistics could be generated to help state fish and wildlife biologists. One report includes the number of angler days by water body for most of the +500 lakes and ponds in the area. Another report provides the number of hunters per township for over 150 townships. Visitor use numbers are generated for each wildlife species hunted including bear, moose, deer, or grouse. This visitor use information has been tabulated for over 28 years and continues to provide biologists with a very unique system enabling them to compare hunting pressure with wildlife populations. With no cost to the state.

Public Accommodations

NMW maintains 400 Authorized Campsites which are equipped with steel fire-rings, outhouses, picnic tables, some with cedar shake covered shelters. The sites are mowed, raked and cleaned frequently by seasonal maintenance crews. All campsites have to meet the standards established by the Department of Human Services to be licensed as a private campground and requirements of the Maine Forest Service to be approved as fire-safe. New campsites must also meet state standards of the Land Use Regulation Commission. In a dedicated relationship, costs to provide camping facilities equal the total fees collected from campers, or about \$175,000/year. Divided by 400 campsites, the cost per campsite is \$450 year. This is substantially lower than most publicly maintained campsites. Another 300 designed fire permits campsites are available that have fewer facilities. These sites are used to accommodate hunters with self-contained campers during the fall hunting season. In addition to campsites, NMW assists hundreds of businesses inside and in the surrounding area by providing advertising and references to members of the public wanting sporting camps, cabin rentals and other services.

FINANCES

Under Maine law, NMW was established as a non-profit corporation. There are no stockholders, no profit sharing and no dividends. None of the revenues collected can be distributed to landowners. From 1970 to 1986, in order to get program up and running, the private owners subsidized the program by nearly three-quarters of a million dollars. Over the past 28 years, first with a minimal \$2 annual fee in the 1970's and then through slight increases approximately every other year, the program eventually became self-supporting in 1986. NMW does not receive any state or federal contributions. Income is budgeted to meet expenses and user fees reflect this arrangement. The program is non-profit with different fees dedicated to offset different portions of management.

User Fees

Day use fees offset checkpoint costs. Season passes are \$25 per person or \$4 per day for Maine residents, \$50 per season or \$7 per day for others. No fees are charged to children under 15 or seniors over 70. Camping fees pay for campsite maintenance and development. Camping fees are \$5 per night per person with season passes available for \$75 for residents or \$100 for non-residents. Maps and many printed brochures have a fee relative to the costs of producing and printing the material. Limited income from retail sales help offset some overhead costs.

Landowner Contributions

Landowners involved in the program still donate substantial staff time and equipment annually to help keep user fees minimal. They provide staff time on the various operating committees, donate professional services of draftsmen, soils evaluators, and other professionals. They donate use of construction equipment and maintain thousands of miles of roads that receive wear and tear from public travel.

As a self-funded program, it will continue in a stable manner compared to programs funded by other means. Users "pay as you go." If there are more visitors in the future, then there should be adequate financial resources to pay for proper management. Additional use is not promoted because the area is not like a park, destination campground or other area designed specifically for recreational use. This benefits users by keeping the NMW from getting overcrowded.

COMMUNICATION WITH LAND USERS

North Maine Woods is a founding member of the Sportsman's / Forest Landowner Alliance, an organization formed in 1992 by Maine's major private forest landowners and major land user organizations. The Alliance was created to work on resolving access and other issues related to public use of Maine's outdoors. Representatives from each user organization and land ownership meet four times a year to safeguard traditional uses of Maine's forests. Through this Alliance, members strive for mutual understanding, cooperation and consensus to resolve issues. Prior to the formation of the Alliance, much of this effort was directed through Maine's legislative arena. The organization provides a direct mechanism to maintain good relations between landusers and landowners in Maine.

User groups participating are Maine Sporting Campowners Association, Maine Trapper's Association, Maine Snowmobile Association, Maine Bowhunters Association, Maine Professional Guides Association, and Sportsman's Alliance of Maine. Since 1992, representatives from the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Department of Conservation and Office of Tourism have joined the organization to provide guidance.

Closing

The North Maine Woods is a private, non-profit, self-supporting organization working to manage public use of a significant forest area in Maine owned by many families, private companies and the state of Maine. With almost three decades of experience, this program works very well to protect the public and private resources in this part of the country for future generations.

In closing, I again want to thank Chair Helen Chenoweth-Hage for the invitation to participate today. I would also like to recognize the efforts of R. J. Smith of the Center for Private Conservation for informing the committee about the existence of North Maine Woods. We hope our presentation is helpful and we wish you success overseeing the tremendous task of managing our national forests.

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