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Testimony for Hearing on “Restoring Public Access to the Public’s Lands:
Issues Impacting Multiple-Use on Our National Forests”

House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

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My name is Sam Davidson. I was born and raised in California, although I have lived and worked all over the American West. I am a life-long angler and hunter and have spent much of my life in the outdoors. Over my career I have been a fishing guide, an outfitter, a wilderness skills instructor, a high school teacher, and executive director of a national outdoor recreation advocacy group called The Access Fund.

Currently I am the Field Director for Trout Unlimited (TU) in California. TU is the largest and oldest coldwater fish conservation group in the country, dedicated to conserving, protecting and restoring trout and salmon in their native watersheds. In this capacity I work with sportsmen and women around the state to identify and conserve areas of high value fish and game habitat.

I also currently serve on the Al Taucher Committee on Preserving Hunting and Sport Fishing Opportunities, which advises the California State Fish and Game Commission on hunting and fishing issues.

Trout Unlimited’s members are as concerned about access to public lands as anyone, maybe more so, because many of our nation’s best large game hunting and backcountry fishing opportunities are found in our national forests.

Trout Unlimited believes strongly in the principle of working collaboratively to achieve meaningful conservation results that provide benefits to a variety of stakeholders. Like others who are testifying today, we work with the Forest Service at the local level to identify, fund, and implement projects that conserve national forest resources while providing a good spectrum of access and sporting opportunities. Through our many local chapters we engage in partnerships with the Forest Service to restore degraded fish and game habitat and to improve the condition of trails. We work with the private sector, too: along California's north coast, for example, TU works with private timber companies to reduce sediment deposition from forest roads and to restore fish passage at road-stream crossings. We also have built a unique partnership with wine grape growers in California's Wine County that helps growers get the water they need when they need it and helps keep more water in stream channels when salmon and steelhead need it. In all, Trout Unlimited members dedicated over 660,000 volunteer hours last year. The importance of volunteerism and these kinds of partnerships will only grow as the agencies that manage our public lands struggle to do more with less.

I'd like to offer some thoughts today on the question of access to our national forests. Access means not being shut out from public lands by private property inholdings. It means being able to travel by motor vehicle through national forests to reach a good variety of trailheads and access points, and it means having well-maintained trails on which to ride, hike, mountain bike, horsepack, or go jeeping. And it means keeping some areas in a more wild condition, because for sportsmen, access is inextricably linked with opportunity—good hunting and fishing are dependent upon healthy habitats.

A 2004 report to the House Appropriations Committee concluded that more than 35 million acres of national forest and BLM lands have inadequate access, mostly due to their being blocked off by private lands. Recently, Congressman Scott Tipton from Colorado, a member of this subcommittee, introduced an amendment to the House Interior and Environment appropriations bill that would dedicate a portion of funding available through the Land and Water Conservation Fund to acquire access for hunters and anglers. Providing adequate funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund and using this fund to improve access for hunters and anglers on public lands is an important way to expand access to our public lands and to keep our sporting heritage alive. Trout Unlimited thanks Congressman Tipton for his leadership on this important issue, and urges Congress to pass the Making Public Lands Public Access Act.

While there will probably always be a public debate about what constitutes "enough" access, it's hard to argue that we don't already have an abundance of roads and trails on our national forests. In California alone, there are some 45,000 miles of roads and trails open for motorized use. And sportsmen are among the many user groups who rely on these roads and trails for their preferred recreation. The Forest Service unfortunately lacks the resources to adequately maintain its system of roads and trails, and faces a maintenance backlog of \$8.4

billion nation-wide. Poorly maintained roads and trails reduce access and diminish sporting opportunities, for example by contributing large amounts of sediment into rivers and streams. Thus, it is sensible – one might even say conservative -- for the Forest Service to analyze its network of roads and trails and to determine the “minimum system” that can be sustained given available resources, yet still provide access without diminishing the quality of recreational opportunities such as hunting and fishing.

The debate over access often seems to pit motorized recreationists against non-motorized recreationists, but to me this is the wrong way to look at the situation. Nearly everyone who visits a national forest does so in some form of motor vehicle. We are pretty much all motorized users in one form or another, and we all have a stake in seeing a well-maintained system of roads and trails on our national forests. I probably spend a total of three weeks per year recreating in our national forests. One of my favorite ways to enjoy these lands is on horseback. To do so I drive my big 4x4 Dodge truck with a customized suspension system and a three-horse stock trailer as far up some road as I can get and still turn around safely, then I park and get in the saddle. I’ve been disappointed in the condition of some national forest roads I’ve been on with this rig, but I’ve never felt the roads didn’t go far enough or there weren’t enough of them.

In my experience, access to virtually all areas of our national forests is pretty darn good. You may not be able to drive a motor vehicle everywhere you want, but you can get pretty close in your truck, dirt bike, or quad. In fact, I recently learned that 78 percent of all national forest lands are within one mile of a road. Even so-called roadless areas often have roads or motorized trails entering or passing through them, and 62 percent of all national forest roadless areas are less than one mile’s distance from a road. Only a little over 11 percent of all national forest roadless areas are two miles or more from a road.

During the Travel Management process recently undertaken by most national forests in this state, which had a lot of opportunities for public input, all but two forests that went through the process added miles of motorized roads and trails to their travel systems. In the Inyo National Forest, for example, the Forest Service designated more than a thousand miles of new motorized routes. The Plumas National Forest, in Congressman McClintock’s district, added 234 miles of new motorized routes and now has nearly 4,500 miles of roads and trails open to motorized use. In the two national forests that I visit most frequently, the Stanislaus and the Sierra, the Forest Service added 137 miles and 82 miles of new motorized routes, respectively, even though they each had more than 2,200 miles of routes open for motorized use to begin with. In fact, when the Sierra National Forest closed 278 miles of Management Level (ML) 1 roads to come into compliance with existing Forest Service policy, the forest offset that by changing 181 miles of closed ML1 roads to ML2 classification so they could be used for motorized travel, and opened 65 miles of previously closed roads for motorized use. At the same time, the Sierra National Forest converted almost 1,100 acres of lands classified as Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized to Semi-Primitive Motorized to accommodate demand for motorized use.

To me, these figures suggest there are good opportunities for motorized access on our national forests, and that the Forest Service is making an effort to provide a satisfactory variety and quantity of motorized use opportunities. Going forward, the challenge will be to find ways for stakeholders to work with the Forest Service to improve and maintain the quality of its roads and trails during a time of diminishing agency budgets.

Another challenge will be keeping our sporting heritage alive and well. Hunting and fishing generate \$76.7 billion in economic activity in the United States annually. But the number of people who engage in hunting and fishing has been dropping steadily for a generation. Today's youth are more likely to shoot ducks or catch a trout in a video game than they are for real in the outdoors. Our national forests provide critical opportunities to hunt and fish, and these opportunities cost a whole lot less than on private lands. However, these opportunities are available because we still have significant areas of land and water on our national forests that are relatively undeveloped. Areas with low road densities frequently have high aquatic and terrestrial habitat values. Conversely, hunting and fishing opportunities in backcountry areas can be compromised by high road densities and frequent motorized traffic. So if we are to keep our hunting and fishing traditions going, there has to be a good balance between motorized access and walk-in areas.

A look at how motorized access impact elk illustrates this point. While we don't have too much elk hunting here in California, elk are one of the most popular game animals in the U.S. and their reaction to motorized roads and trails has been studied extensively. A 1983 study (Lyon) of the impact of road density on elk populations reported that "habitat effectiveness" could be expected to decline by at least 25 percent with a density of 1 mile of road per square mile and by at least 50 percent with two miles of road per square mile. This study further reported that as road densities increased to five to six miles of roads per square mile, elk use declined to less than 25 percent of potential.

Other studies have shown that closing roads benefit elk. Irwin and Peek (1979) found that road closures allowed elk to stay in preferred habitat longer while elk in roaded areas were displaced. Leptich and Zager (1991) found that closing roads extended the age structure and doubled the bulls per cow sex ratio. Gratson et al. (2000) measured elk hunter success in relation to road density and found that hunter success almost doubled when open road density was reduced from 2.54 km/km² to 0.56 km/km².

In addition, backcountry areas in national forests harbor some of the last populations of wild native trout, and are the source and filter for water that in dozens of rivers here in California ultimately provides downstream fisheries. A good example is the Truckee River, a world-renowned trophy trout fishery in the stretch between the town of Truckee and Reno, Nevada. The Truckee River begins in a roadless area that spans portions of the Eldorado National Forest and the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, serves as the primary source of inflow to Lake

Tahoe, then provides exceptional trout fishing as it runs next to Interstate Highway 80 for miles before emptying into Pyramid Lake.

Trout and salmon require cold, clean water to survive. That's why many rare or iconic native trout species across the West are found only or mostly in backcountry areas with few or no roads in our national forests. In California, to accomplish the popular Heritage Trout Challenge, a program offered by the Department of Fish and Game, you must catch six species of native trout in their historic ranges. Yet you cannot achieve this goal without visiting at least one roadless area in a national forest, because six of the eleven species of inland trout native to California -- including our state freshwater fish, the golden trout -- are found only in roadless backcountry on national forest lands.

My final observation is that it makes no fiscal sense to promote or require more road building on our national forests. The Forest Service does not have the resources to properly care for existing roads and trails; in California's national forests, according to Taxpayers for Common Sense, there was a road maintenance backlog of \$1.1 billion -- and that was seven years ago. Moreover, some motorized access is lost every year because the Forest Service cannot maintain ML2 roads sufficiently and they lapse into the ML1 category, which precludes public use. We should take better care of the road and trail infrastructure we already have before directing scarce dollars to creating and managing new roads and trails.

On our national forests, we face access-related challenges associated with private land blockages, maintenance of roads and trails, and striking the right balance between motorized access and protecting high quality fish and wildlife habitat that supports hunting and fishing. Things may not be perfect, but I think it's important to acknowledge the efforts of the Forest Service to provide for recreational access. Our national forests are open to everyone, and for sportsmen, there is no need to pay extra fees to fish or hunt as on private lands, or to own large tracts of land yourself. More than 40 million people take advantage of these opportunities to hunt and fish on national forests. This natural heritage is among America's greatest assets.

When it comes to access there will always be disagreements, but there is more on which we can agree than disagree. Some people disagree with the outcomes of the Travel Management process, but there is broad agreement on the need for designated motor vehicle routes. We all want a well-maintained system of roads and trails. We all benefit from increased access points to national forests through acquisition of private lands or easements. What we need is a willingness to work together in a constructive way, and the tools which will help us achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.

That means providing the Forest Service with the resources it needs to maintain its roads and trails. This will not be easy given our current budget challenges, but maintaining funding to the extent possible will enable the Forest Service to work effectively with partners on critical infrastructure maintenance projects. To this end, Congress should provide funding for the Legacy

Roads and Trails program, which helps the Forest Service reduce road and trail impacts to rivers and streams through activities like removing fish passage barriers and addressing critical repair and maintenance needs. Congress also should fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund. In this case, the budget deficit should not stand in the way, since the LWCF is funded by existing off-shore oil and gas receipts, and the outdoor recreation economy, which the LWCF directly supports, continues to be a growth sector of our national economy, creating and sustaining good jobs in all regions of the country. Building on the successful adoption of Congressman Tipton's amendment to the Interior appropriations bill, Congress should pass the Making Public Lands Public Access Act. This legislation, introduced in the House by Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus co-chair Rep. Jeff Miller, and in the Senate by Sportsmen's Caucus co-chair Sen. Jon Tester and vice-chair Sen. Jim Risch, would help to provide additional tools for acquiring public access.

And Congress should also make sure not to take us backward. For example, blocking the Forest Service from implementing decisions that were made -- with substantial public input -- in the Travel Management process, especially when the net result was well over a thousand miles of new roads and trails being designated for motorized use in national forests in California, is counter-productive. Also, legislation such as HR 1581, the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act, could reduce hunting and fishing opportunities rather than expand them. While it may be appropriate to reclassify some Wilderness Study Areas or Inventoried Roadless Areas to facilitate more resource development or motorized use, this should be done on a case-by-case basis, not all at once without local input.

In 1916 Theodore Roosevelt wrote in an essay on conservation of wildlife that the concept of 'the greatest good for the greatest number' applies "not merely to the people now alive, but to the unborn generations... Our duty to the whole...bids us restrain... from wasting the heritage of these unborn generations." I have two teenage children, a daughter and a son, and I want them -- and their children -- to have the same opportunities I have had to experience the outdoors over their lifetimes.

This coming Saturday is National Hunting and Fishing Day. After my 13-year-old son's football game that morning, I will be taking him to the mountains for some trout fishing. We'll drive the truck to the end of a road somewhere, probably the Clover Meadow Road in the Sierra National Forest, and wander off down a pretty little stream called Granite Creek. I have fished this creek dozens of times over the past thirty years. It'll be a good day, and it won't cost me much, either. We'll camp out that night, either in the bed of the truck or on the ground, and fish again the next day. I'm trying to teach my son that you don't get where you want to go in life without working hard, and I figure one of the ways for him to learn that lesson is to fish a stream like Granite Creek, where the further you go from the trailhead, the better the fishing gets.

We thank the Chairman for calling attention to this important issue, and we look forward to working with members of the committee, the Forest Service, and other stakeholders to maintain and improve access to our national forests.

Thank you.