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Testimony on “Opportunities for Outdoor Recreation on Public Lands”
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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee,

My name is Russ Ehnes. I am the Executive Director of the National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council, or NOHVCC. I am also a Fourth generation Montanan and third generation motorcycle trail rider. My grandfather and father began riding back-country trails in 1959 in the Lincoln, Montana area soon after my parents met. My mom began riding the trails in 1960, the year after my brother was born. Their favorite trips were to Hart Lake and Bighorn Lake, near the Continental Divide. The trip to Bighorn was an overnight trip that almost always delivered great fishing.

The creation of the Scapegoat Wilderness put an end to those trips in 1972 but there were still other places to ride near Lincoln. My brother and I were old enough to trail ride by the early 70's so we rode the trails with Mom and Dad. One of our favorite rides was from Rogers Pass, along the Continental Divide to Flesher Pass and then down the Seven-Up Pete drainage to my grandparents' house. That trail was closed after the grizzly bear was listed as threatened on the endangered species list. In the mid-eighties travel planning resulted in the closure of several other key trails in the area and what remains open now is an incomplete system of trails that doesn't connect. The only way to connect opportunities is with roads that aren't legal for OHVs. Forget about the family trail ride in the Lincoln area for now.

Being from Great Falls, we did most of our riding in the Lewis and Clark National Forest. We rode in the Little Belt Mountains but also made annual trips to the Badger/Two Medicine area near Browning and springtime trips in the Highwood Mountains.

In 1986 several of us formed The Great Falls Trail Bike Riders Association because the Forest Service was again beginning travel planning in the Little Belts. Since then we have built the organization to over 900 members and have developed trail maintenance agreements on most of the trails in the Little Belts and Highwoods, have reconstructed and maintained hundreds of miles of trail, donated thousands of hours of labor, trained over one hundred volunteers, and have secured several hundred thousand dollars in grant funds for maintenance and education.

In 1993 travel planning in the Highwoods resulted in the closure of seventy percent of the mountain range to motorized use and the designation of just 29 miles of trail to motorized use.

The latest round of travel planning on the Lewis and Clark began in 2004. Our local club participated in every aspect of the process including trail inventory efforts, collaborative meetings, the comment periods for the proposed action and draft EIS.

The decisions closed all but one short ATV trail in the Badger Two Medicine area and most of the trails in the remaining Rocky Mountain Front areas. In the Little Belts it closed all but two routes in the 90,000

acre Middle Fork of the Judith Wilderness study area, all of the trails in the Hoover Creek and Tillinghast drainages and over one third of the trails in the Deep Creek/Tenderfoot area permanently. It closed all but a couple trails in the Deep Creek/Tenderfoot area until July first of each year to protect elk calving. Ironically, the problem with the elk herd in the area is that it is too large. Obviously the use of trails in the area for the past fifty years had not affected the ability of the elk to reproduce.

The decision in Little Belts has been described as a “balance” decision because several groups wanted all the trails in the inventory roadless areas and the WSA closed.

I am not saying that none of these closures were legitimate or should not have been made or that OHV recreation should be allowed everywhere it was in 1959.

What I am attempting to demonstrate is that each of these decisions had an effect on the ability of the OHV public to access public lands and the cumulative effects of these individual decisions has greatly reduced OHV opportunities and concentrated use into smaller areas. The vast majority of these trails were sustainable and could have been managed for OHV recreation.

This is a scenario that has repeated itself hundreds of times nationwide and has been accelerated by action including the Forest Service Travel Management Rule, the Roadless Rules, and the Endangered Species Act. Areas with strong clubs have fared better than areas without but the net result has been massive losses of OHV opportunities in many areas.

It is time for us to begin addressing OHV recreation in a more holistic way. The NOHVCC has worked closely with the Federal agencies to teach successful OHV management techniques that have proven successful for more than three decades. We need to recognize that OHV recreation is an important resource that is an important part of what defines our people and that needs protection through effective planning. Only then will we achieve a true balance.