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Testimony before the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Committee on Resources
U.S. House of Representatives

Hearing on HR 2039
Federal Land Recreational Visitor Protection Act of 2005

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Sub-Committee on the importance of HR 2039 to avalanche safety in the U.S. I have prepared a more comprehensive analysis that is available through committee staff, and would like to summarize for the avalanche community at large the need for passing this legislation.

Snow avalanches occur in all of the mountainous states of the west as well as Alaska and New Hampshire. Approximately 35 people per year die in avalanches with annual property damage in the range of \$1,000,000. This toll would be significantly higher if not for the efforts of a number of avalanche professionals engaged in risk reduction activities of various kinds.

For many years, the avalanche community has had adequate resources to ensure a reasonable level of risk reduction. In more recent times, recreational activity on federal lands has increased substantially as has vehicle traffic levels on mountain highways. This combination has increased risk levels substantially without a corresponding investment in new tools to help mitigate this risk. The proposed legislation would provide for the tools necessary to stay ahead of the risk curve, as well as providing an advisory committee so that future needs might be identified ahead of time and risk mitigation means implemented.

Perhaps the most important issue addressed by the legislation is to provide funding to resolve a critical supply problem related to the use of military artillery for risk mitigation. Artillery has been used extensively for the past 40 years to reduce avalanche risk, and in many cases has been found to be the only effective tool. Collectively, artillery based avalanche mitigation protects approximately 100,000 vehicles per day on transportation corridors and 5,000,000 skiers annually on national forest lands. Due to complex changes in the way the military conducts their activities, suitable supplies have become rare and no new systems are in the works that would be good substitutes. The opportunity to invest in re-conditioning older weapons systems exists right now but may not exist in the near future. HR 2039 would ensure that suitable supplies are maintained well into the future for these activities.

Additional opportunities are provided by this legislation to enhance our capabilities for educating groups of public land users that are particularly at risk from avalanches. Additional means are provided to manage data in a way that enhances our ability to communicate with affected users of federal lands.

Current programs managed by the Park Service and Forest Service, while providing significant benefits in terms of avalanche education, do not provide the level of support needed to address the burgeoning problem of avalanche risk. Almost all the avalanches that occur start on federal lands. The Forest Service annually spends approximately \$500,000 on avalanche forecast centers, but no other federal funding occurs for other avalanche related issues. As social pressures continue to increase on mountainous environments, it becomes increasingly important for the avalanche community to have the tools necessary to stay ahead of the risk curve. HR 2039 would provide the framework and funding necessary to accomplish this goal.