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Testimony of Jerry Hanson, Snowmobiler and member of Minnesota United Snowmobilers Association Given before the Subcommittee on National Parks of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Resources, Representative Richard W. Pombo, Chairman

Mr. Chairman, Committee members and guests, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Jerry Hanson. I am a snowmobiler, past director and current member of the Minnesota United Snowmobilers Association and certified snowmobile safety instructor. My home is in New Hope, Minnesota, a northern suburb of Minneapolis. I speak to you today individually and on behalf of my organization.

I have been involved in snowmobiling since 1970. My wife and I have ridden thousands of miles on public land, including National Parks, both in and out of Minnesota and it is important to me that access to these lands remains available to snowmobilers and other recreationists. Our snowmobiling experiences with family members and friends were wonderful and we continue to benefit from these experiences. My niece and nephew have just recently received their snowmobile safety certificates and are anxious to be able to experience the beautiful National Parks along with us.

My snowmobiling experience in National Parks includes trips to Yellowstone National Park and at home in Minnesota in Voyageurs National Park. Our snowmobiling also includes riding the Gandy Dancer Trail which connects eastern Minnesota to western Wisconsin across the St. Croix National Scenic River. This trail is extremely important to the local businesses on both sides of the river and the economic stability of the area. Until a few years ago, my local snowmobile club groomed trails beginning at Coon Rapids Dam and west through the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area to our trail system. Although our trail in that area was closed due to housing development, the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, which covers 72 miles through the Twin Cities from Ramsey on the North to Hastings on the South, was an essential part of our trail system. Each of these areas is unique in its experience and scenery and is an integral part of our snowmobiling experience.

Yellowstone is an awesome National Park and, in my opinion, much more beautiful in the winter than the summer, but in this testimony, I would like to focus my comments more about Minnesota's National Park, Voyageurs.

Voyageurs National Park was officially established in 1975. It is unique in the national park system in that it is a water dominated park with more than 30 lakes and hundreds of rocky islands. Four large lakes cover almost 40 percent of the park's 218,054 acres. More importantly from a management perspective, is the fact that only about one-third of the park's water surface is comprised of bodies of water that are located entirely within park boundaries and the one large lake within the park is in a chain of lakes influenced by activities and decisions made outside the National Park Service. Only the 26 interior lakes (about 4% of the total park water surface) are subject to independent decisions by the Park Service. Access to the 75,000 acre roadless Kabetogama peninsula, the islands and nearly all of the park's shoreline is by water craft in the summer with virtually an unlimited number of access points. Snowmobiling is only allowed on the lakes and on the limited land trails in the winter.

In the winter there are 110 miles of snowmobile trails on the frozen large lakes. The most spectacular trail is the ungroomed 13.2 mile Chain of Lakes Snowmobile Trail. This trail twists and turns through the Kabetogama peninsula connecting lakes with sheer cliffs and rock formations and scenery that compares to none other in the State. The other land trails are short portages where lake ice is unsafe. On the east end of the peninsula you can snowmobile to Kettle Falls where you can stand at the lookout and look south into Canada. In the past, the restaurant in the Kettle Falls Hotel has been open in the winter, giving visitors a taste of history of the area and providing a stopping off place in a day long snowmobile ride.

Snowmobiling is an extremely important part of the winter economy in Minnesota. There are approximately 269,000 registered snowmobiles in the state, 300 snowmobile clubs with the clubs providing 90 percent of 20,000 miles of interconnected trail. The St. Croix National Scenic River, Mississippi National River and Recreation Area and the major lakes in Voyageurs National Park provide trail links in our system. Being in the most northerly part of the state with generally the best chance of snow, from January through March, the park is a primary destination for winter snowmobile vacations.

Minnesota's snowmobilers feel it is of the utmost importance to protect their snowmobile experience in Voyageurs National Park. Although the Park's authorization documents provide for continued access by snowmobiles, motorized recreational use and snowmobiling in Voyageurs has been under attack for most of its existence. The Park is adjacent to Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and was established to complement the BWCAW by accommodating a wider variety of recreational uses. Any effort to expand the BWCAW to include Voyageurs would have a harmful effect on recreation and the local economy. Lawsuits have been filed to prohibit snowmobiling in the Park for various reasons, including non-submission of wilderness recommendation, to protect wolves and to protect eagles and our state organization has been involved for more than 15 years in litigation to protect snowmobile access in the park for ourselves and future generations of snowmobile enthusiasts.

There are five snowmobile clubs and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources that groom and maintain the trail systems which connect to the snowmobile trails in the Voyageurs National Park. According to the club trail coordinators, the National Park personnel have worked well with the local snowmobile clubs and the State of Minnesota to develop the on-lake marked trail system which is unique to National Parks and the rest of Minnesota. The Park Service has developed a system of checking the ice on the lakes for safe travel and local teens have been educated and certified by the Park Service to assist in determining ice safety.

The Chain of Lakes Scenic Trail is Minnesota's answer to Old Faithful and has a scenic draw for the back country snowmobile experience. Recognizing the economic value of snowmobiling, having the Kettle Falls Hotel open in the winter would provide an additional destination in the park. If there is any way that could be feasible, it would be a great benefit to the snowmobilers. Alternatively, at least having a shelter and picnic area with outhouse facility open at Kettle Falls would be appreciated. A local snowmobile club is willing to work with the Park Service in building outhouses on skids that could be brought in for the season and then removed.

The biggest operational problem with the Park and snowmobilers is the speed limit. The Park has a 45 mile per hour speed limit on water and 25 mile per hour on the land trails. Lake trails can be safely traveled at higher speeds and, in fact, by law counties in Minnesota may increase the speed limit on larger lakes to 60 miles per hour. Except for counties that have adopted the 60 mile per hour speed limit on large lakes, Minnesota's maximum snowmobile speed limit is 50 miles per hour. This causes considerable confusion on the four large lakes where a portion of each of three of the lakes is in the Park and the balance under Minnesota regulations. The fourth lake is partially in Canada. The park borders are not defined. It would be very helpful if the Park could conform on the lakes in the VNP to the state speed limit.

The confusion with the 25 mile per hour speed limit on the portages is that, in some cases, a snowmobile travels over water and then back on land and the water portion is occasionally included in the "portage". Tickets may then be given for speeding. Snowmobilers riding the portages can become confused on where the 25 mile per hour speed limit will be enforced. Possibly something as simple as signs stating "Begin 25 mph" and "End 25 mph" would solve this confusion.

Minnesota is at the forefront of snowmobile safety training and Snowmobilers truly believe that education and law enforcement are important ingredients to a safe trail system. Snowmobile safety training is done by more than 2,000 certified volunteer snowmobile training instructors in the state. In Minnesota, anyone born after December 31, 1976, must possess a snowmobile safety certification to ride legally. More than 145,000 young people have completed the training since 1969 when the youth snowmobile safety training began.

Even so, enforcement this season has been a concern for snowmobilers. Across the area it seems that riders are considered fair game by enforcement. It is not uncommon to be checked three, maybe even four different times in a day by Park rangers or local and state authorities. Rangers and Minnesota Conservation Officers have gone so far as hiding behind sheets on the lakes when running speed traps. These enforcement concerns discourage visitors to the park and the surrounding area contrary to the state legislation required for Voyageurs National Park to be officially established. In that legislation, the state found that the park "will be of special and immediate benefit to the citizens of the State, due to its accessibility to them, and to the effect it may reasonably be expected to have on the development of tourism and related economic activities."

I would like to tell you a little about who we are. Minnesota's snowmobilers are an average age of approximately 42, active in our communities and are caring and compassionate citizens. In the 2003-2004 season alone, Minnesota's snowmobilers raised in excess of \$630,000 for charities and community activities supporting children, senior citizens, parks, needy families, scholarships, volunteer fire departments, first response teams, homeless charities, and food shelves to name a few.

We volunteer to do the work to maintain the trails for use by the general public.

We are also good stewards of the land. In Minnesota we ride on our designated trails, we volunteer to do cleanups along our roads and in our parks, picking up trash that has been left by the general public. This is our land and we want to leave it in the best possible condition for future generations - our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren - to recreate responsibly.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to address you today and will be available for any questions you may have.