



ROB STAFSHOLT

STATE SENATOR • 10th SENATE DISTRICT

(608) 266-7745
Toll Free: (800) 862-1092
Sen.Stafsholt@legis.wi.gov

P.O. Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707-7882

DATE: May 13, 2024
RE: Testimony for Field Hearing titled “Improving Access and Opportunities for Hunting, Fishing, and Outdoor Recreation on America’s Federal Lands”
TO: Members of the House Subcommittee on Federal Lands
FROM: Senator Rob Stafsholt/ WI 10th Senate District

Good afternoon. I would like to start by thanking the Chair and the Committee for coming here today. In your roles as federal representatives, you face many issues from all areas of our great country as well as from an array of places around the world that require your attention, so thank you so much for taking the time and the hassle of arrangements to be here today. I really do appreciate it.

A little background on me first, although it is true that I am before you today as a member of the Wisconsin State Senate, and in my role there, I am the Chair of the Senate Committee on Sporting Heritage & Financial Institutions. Perhaps that is not my most applicable trait for the hearing today. What is more relevant in today's discussion is that I am a life-long fan of our National Forests. My father began hunting in the Chequamegon National Forest in the early 1960s, so by my arrival some years later, multiple trips to the Chequamegon Forest were a normal occurrence in my family activities each year. My love of the Chequamegon began with hunting, but during college years, I made spending cash by getting the required permit from the Forestry office and harvesting balsam boughs to sell to people making Christmas wreaths and other decorations. A few years later as a husband and a father, I started bringing my own family to the Chequamegon Forest to share and enjoy the beauty it had to offer on hiking trips, going boating, picture taking, berry and mushroom harvesting, ATV riding, wilderness exploring, and many other activities, all of which involved getting off the main roads and seeing what was really out there in the National Forest. In my early 20s, I managed to purchase a chunk of land with an old, single-wide trailer house, a rough bunkhouse, and an outhouse on it within the borders of the Forest. I still have that property today, although I now have a small cabin there with more modern facilities and I go there as much as my schedule permits, maybe even more than it permits! My point is, the conservation of, and an appreciation of the Chequamegon National Forest is in the backbone of who I am.

Over all these years, one of the things that I believe threatens the Chequamegon National Forest the most is a slow but determined reduction in access to the Forest, which slowly reduces the number of people who come here. My greatest concern is that with a continued loss of access of the Chequamegon National Forest, there will be a loss of use of the Forest, which slowly leads us to a reduction of the percentage of the general public that appreciates our National Forests. If any of you have been in politics very long, you probably have figured out we begin to question why we preserve things if not very many people care. We need to reopen closed access roads and make sure people continue to cherish our Forests and not just consider them to be "fly-over areas".

Some time ago, the Forest established the Travel Use Map. The Travel Use Map is flawed in the fact that it did not catch all the access roads that already existed in the Forest, some of which had or still have Federal Forest Road numbers on them. It is a big task to map it all, no doubt. The problem is, when access roads did not make it on the map, they are deemed "unauthorized roads". I have called in or attended meetings and brought certain roads to their attention, only to be told "Someone must have put that in there illegally and it can't be used". That simply is not the case. Almost all roads were made with a bulldozer for the purpose of a Forestry logging job. Regardless, those roads are now closed.

Lately, there has been a significant increase in logging in the Chequamegon Forest due to some court cases and policy decisions, and that is great. Logging is fundamental in the health of our National Forest. It revitalizes the forest with new growth that creates better habitat for our vast array of wildlife that live here. Logging also helps prevent mass forest fires that would sweep through and be detrimental to the Forest and private property as well. And logging definitely generates revenue for our Forestry to use in the maintenance of this great public land, but it is also important to local economies that rely on those jobs and support service revenues. However, there is an issue with the logging contract term, or the policy, if you will, on how we manage the roads that are required to be able to complete a logging job. Currently, it is my understanding from my discussions with the loggers themselves that are out there doing the work that they are required to berm these roads off at the end of the logging project. Now, I can understand if this area was riddled with roads everywhere and adding all the new roads would really make the Forest an area of roads with some woodland in between them here and there, but the truth is, these are massive tracts of land, most not square in shape, that are often 5 miles by 7 miles in size between fire lanes. We should also consider the cost of putting in these roads to the taxpayers who fund the Forest. We do not write out checks for road development or improvement on these logging roads, but the loggers who bid these jobs take that into account on how high their bid is. I believe that if we are paying for these roads to be built that we should be able to use them to access these massive tracts of public land after the log job is over.

Even more egregious to me is when we have logging roads that are on the Travel Use Map and have been in existence for decades and decades, and been used by the public the entire time, and those roads are used, or at least partially used, to get back to a log job, those roads are sometimes bermed off at the end of the logging operation at that site. I have asked the loggers, "That road has been here for 30 years. Just because you used the first mile of it to get to the logging site, why are you berming it now that you are done?" The response I got was, "I know, and I don't want to, but it is required in my logging contract." I believe, and I hope I am right, that this is simply an oversight in the Forest's logging management and not an intentional method to conveniently reduce access to our National Forest.

Lastly, you may wonder why all these "two-track" logging roads that are almost all dead ends are so important. That's a great question and deserves an answer. There are a few main reasons I would like to highlight. When these roads are not used by the public, they grow in with vegetation and are no longer passable with motor vehicles or equipment. In the unfortunate event that we do get a wildfire, our firefighting teams will not be able to use these roads to get ahead of the fire faster. We also have a wide array of users of the Forest. As officials entrusted to do what is best for the general public, we

should seek to reduce user conflicts. Bow hunters use these two-track roads to get off main fire lanes to access hunting areas, but also so vehicles are not parked out where log trucks would have to navigate around them. With a little rain at the right time, we usually get a pretty good berry crop out in the Forest, and both local residents and tourists will tell you some of the best berry picking is at the far end of these logging roads where there is usually a primitive cul-de-sac that the log trucks used to turn around. If the public can't use these roads, they can't get there to pick the berries and enjoy our resource. Trout fishermen/women use these two-track trails to get to the middle of these land tracts to get to fishing holes that are not accessible when they are closed. Bear hunting is a very popular sport in the Chequamegon National Forest and is often done in groups. I have talked to many of these groups over the years, and almost all of them would prefer to be on two-track roads with their bait sites and not out on main fire lanes. Although gun deer hunters in the Chequamegon are in a definite decline in their numbers, in previous times of higher hunter numbers, these access roads were almost required just to allow people to spread out and get away from each other in order to have some solitude to experience. Bough cutters, like I mentioned I was back in the day, use these roads to get to new areas to cut boughs, ensuring we don't overharvest along all the main fire lanes. Bird hunters use these two-tracks to hunt on, and you might think they would be better off if the road was closed so they could walk it without interruption, but after a few years without vehicle access, the grow up and the bird don't use those areas anymore. So in a nutshell, we need all these access roads to allow user groups access to the resources and elbow room away from others.

Again, I really want to thank all of you for coming here today and listening to me talk about how important access roads are in the Chequamegon Forest historically, in today's use, and for the future appreciation of the Forest by the general public, because they can get to the remote areas and enjoy it!