

Testimony of Greg Martin, Wood River Bicycle Coalition
Before the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation
Oversight Hearing on “Outdoor Recreation Opportunities on State, Local and
Federal Land”
June 27, 2013

Thank you Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, and distinguished members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today. It is an honor and a privilege to speak with you on issues that are so critical to the development of our nation’s outdoor economy.

I am Greg Martin and as my day job, I am a full-time firefighter for the City of Ketchum, Idaho. However, I sit before you today in my capacity on the Board of Directors of the Wood River Bicycle Coalition (WRBC). WRBC is a Chapter of the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) and an organization for which I served voluntarily as the Director from 2010-2012.

In addition to the WRBC and IMBA, I also serve as the Wood River Trails Coordinator for the Blaine County Recreation District. I like to believe there is no one in the Wood River Valley who is more passionate and active in developing and maintaining trail recreation opportunities.

The Sun Valley area of Idaho has long been recognized as a destination for downhill skiing and winter sports enthusiasts. In recent years, word has spread that recreation opportunities in the Wood River Valley are pretty incredible even after the snow melts. We have seen a significant increase in summer tourist visits to the area. Local businesses are generating revenue year-round; hotels, restaurants, shops and outfitters are thriving. In 2012 our trail system had 725,000 user visits while all skier days (alpine and Nordic) was 400,000.

High quality trail experiences for mountain bicycling and other trail user groups are a *critical* component of successful outdoor recreation destinations such as Sun Valley. It is in search of these unique outdoor experiences that tourists – and the

associated economic benefits from their visit – travel to the area from outside the region. Creating these high quality experiences requires deliberate trail planning, which necessitates calculated collaboration between the local government, federal land management agencies, local industry and the recreation community.

Land management agencies commit a considerable amount of resources to managing the entire landscape (Forest and Resource Planning) and they put substantial efforts into deciding which roads and trails can be used by motorized vehicles (Travel Management). However, it is rare that we see a deliberate effort to plan how a trail system interacts with the landscape or how uses are managed to provide a specific experience. Managing trails based on desired experiences, sustainable construction and maintenance, and suitability for the desired conditions of the area rather than simply by mode of travel would allow the agencies to actually manage a trail system rather than a spider web of legacy routes.

Significant quantities of the trails currently in use on federal public lands were not designed or constructed to be sustainable recreation trails. They were developed as temporary extraction roads, firebreaks, hunting routes, or game trails and have been repurposed as long term public access routes. A purposefully designed trail system is light on the land, showcases the landscape, steers visitors away from sensitive areas, and provides a broad range of experiences.

By designing and developing trails that provide visitor experiences that are in demand, visitors will assist as volunteers, donors, partners, and advocates for those projects and possibly the larger mission of the federal land management agencies.

Acknowledging the need for community involvement in the trail planning process, the WRBC was formed in 2008. WRBC has been able to build strong relationships with land managers through our volunteer trail work program and other trail projects that we undertake. Our goal is to always “over deliver” and proudly, I can say that we consistently achieve that goal. Since 2010, WRBC has donated over 1000 hours of volunteer labor and invested nearly \$50K in trail projects and equipment in the area.

Through my position as the Wood River Trails Coordinator with the Blaine County Recreation District (BCRD), I have the opportunity to work with land managers from Blaine County, State of Idaho, BLM, and two districts of the Sawtooth National Forest (SNRA & KRD). We work cooperatively to share resources and streamline our operations as much as possible. Many parts of our trail system in the Wood River Valley cross a “patchwork” of land ownership. Our goal is to provide a consistent experience for trail users and not have noticeable differences in how the various agencies care for their portion of the trail system.

However, because recreation trends outpace policy there is often a lack of clear guidance on how to effectively manage many recreational pursuits, particularly the subtle differences of the different disciplines within a given sport. Thus, without substantial coordination there is potential for land management prescriptions to become inconsistent and unpredictable.

Further complicating the process are the polarized stand offs between extractive use and pure conservation that often leads to recreational uses being overlooked during planning processes. Integrating consistent and thoughtful management of the ecological, social and economic value of recreation into the multiple use mandates and processes is crucial to ensuring the sustainability of outdoor recreation and providing an accessible connection to the outdoors.

Despite the challenges, we have seen improvements that lead us to believe the agencies may turn a corner. The Forest Service Planning Rule Directives hold substantial promise for recreation groups, including mountain bicyclists, that are willing to engage and educate agency field officers about the places and experiences they want to enhance and protect.

Recent efforts by the BLM to gather comprehensive recreation use data and engage a multitude of stakeholders in the planning process have encouraged mountain bicyclists that our voice will be heard and opportunities will expand.

Legislative land management designations can also contribute to the “patchwork” if they are not developed through a collaborative process with a broad range of stakeholders. Where they have been developed collaboratively, legislative designations have protected both the landscape and the recreation experiences that it provides.

Some designations, such as Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers, have organic acts that set the framework for how all such areas will be managed. Other designations such as National Recreation Areas or National Conservation Areas, do not. Because of the lack of an organic act some advocates from the traditional conservation community and members of Congress view them with suspicion, believing that loopholes will be discovered and allow for unintended uses.

The commands of these other legislative designations varies from detailed management prescriptions to slightly more directed versions of multiple use. While the majority of these designations include recreation as a purpose in their enabling legislation, relatively few are specifically targeted at protecting and enhancing outdoor recreation opportunities. Managing these places to preserve and enhance the recreation experience provides substantial benefits for local residents and make crucial contributions to local economies. They are a crucial component of the outdoor recreation landscape, yet they remain substantially under represented with regard to protection and management for the unique benefits they provide.

Recreation exists throughout the spectrum of land designations and management prescriptions. Many outdoor recreation experiences demand landscapes that are predominantly natural with little human influence. Others require more developed facilities that are designed to handle impacts and manage or mitigate impacts. Mountain biking in various forms has a presence across this spectrum as well.

From backcountry epic rides that expose one to their natural surroundings, to lift-serviced resort riding that provides endless thrills; mountain bicycling is an ever-growing means of exploration and excitement. Ensuring that the mountain bicycling experiences offered in a given landscape are consistent with the rest of the uses and

desired conditions of that landscape requires well informed land management designations and deliberate trail planning that address mountain bicycling on its own merits.

Collaboration can also lead to the development of pragmatic management tools that serve to enhance the recreation experience and protect resources. A great example of this is the creation and administration of the Trailink.org (<http://trailink.org>) website. This website was created as a place where trail users could come to find current trail information ranging from Spring trail reports to sheep herd locations throughout the season. The site was created and is maintained through a partnership between the USFS, BLM, BCRD, and WRBC.

Also, in the Wood River Valley of Idaho there are two projects underway at this time that showcase the USFS working to meet the needs of mountain bikers seeking experiences from different parts of the spectrum. One will provide a lift-serviced resort riding trail network that will provide unparalleled thrills, and the other will provide a backcountry experience that will immerse one in their natural surroundings.

The first is the approval of a trails plan for Bald Mountain that will provide lift-accessible trails for riders looking for a downhill experience. Lift-serviced mountain biking fulfills an important recreational niche in an appropriate location where environmental impacts are mitigated by the existing development. These enhanced opportunities make use of existing infrastructure and help provide year-round support for local businesses that frequently struggle when tourists leave at the end of the ski season.

The second is the Galena Summer Trails Project. This project will add much needed beginner and entry level trails to the existing trail system that is mostly advanced and expert level. It will also enhance the riding experience by providing better signage for both navigation and trail etiquette. If completed, this project will also add a viable mountain bicycling component to Galena Lodge's youth natural history education and youth outdoor skills training. Mountain biking is one of the outdoor

activities included in the curriculum, but the lack of suitable trails for beginning mountain bicyclists at the lodge makes putting on quality youth mountain bike programs challenging. The trail network described in the preferred alternative would best provide the type of experiences on which successful mountain biking programs can be built. These types of experiences help support healthy life habits and can encourage a profound appreciation of nature.

These collaborative efforts by the Forest Service, the BLM, Blaine County, local mountain bike and trail enthusiasts, and Sun Valley Co. are developing the recreation assets necessary to ensure a healthy outdoor recreation and tourism economy.