

WILKINSON TESTIMONY
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The House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water and Power
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Joint Oversight Field Hearing:
Logs in the Road: Eliminating Federal Red Tape and Excessive Litigation to Create
Healthy Forests, Jobs and Abundant Water and Power Supplies

Thank you Chairmen McClintock and Bishop for providing me the opportunity to testify at today's field hearing.

My name is Gary Wilkinson I have been involved in the motorsports industry for almost forty five years. I co-owned and managed Handlebar Cycle from 1980 to 2007. Handlebar Cycle grew from a more or less mom and pop operation to a business that supported 10 families when I sold the business in 2007. I am currently employed at Handlebar Motorsports where I am the general manager.

I am a native of Colorado and I have lived in Durango since 1963. I am the second of four generations of the Wilkinson family who have had the privilege to enjoy OHV recreation on the public lands in Colorado. I am the president of San Juan Trail Riders which is a 400 plus member organization dedicated to promoting responsible OHV recreation and I currently serve on the Colorado State Parks OHV Subcommittee. I also hike, mountain bike, and in past years have enjoyed hunting and fishing in "Colorful Colorado."

Economic importance of Off Highway Vehicle and snowmobile recreation

Colorado offers unique opportunities for motorized recreation throughout much of the state. This is mainly due to the vast amount of appropriate terrain for off-highway motorized recreation. As such, the sport and industry of motorized recreation has enjoyed an increase in popularity in the state by both residents and non-residents. Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) and Snowmobile based recreation contributes to the State's economy via the purchase of vehicles, making expenditures while on recreational activity trips (day and overnight), spending money to operate and maintain vehicles, purchasing other accessories needed while riding (clothes, safety equipment), and making other expenditures for items that support their activities (food and fuel, etc.).

While most tourism and recreation economic impact studies under-represent the impact of OHV and Snowmobile recreation, the most recent (2009) study by the Colorado Off Highway Vehicle Coalition, conducted by the Louis Berger Group, gives us the best data to date. According to that study, which surveyed the economic activity in the 2007-08 season, motorized recreation enthusiasts were estimated to have generated over \$784 million in total direct gross sales for motorized recreation throughout the year. This direct spending generated an additional \$243 million in downstream gross sales due to additional economic activity. Motorized recreation in Colorado is directly or indirectly responsible for over 12,000 jobs and \$370 million in labor income and \$107 million in Indirect Business Taxes.

Decades of road, trail and snowmobile closures – a critical mass has been reached

My family, and the local OHV groups that I have been involved with, have been active partners with the USFS for decades. We've been involved in maintaining trails and encouraging a "Stay

the Trail” ethic – even when the USFS allowed us to go anywhere, anytime! It is important to note that the OHV community in Colorado has fully supported the 2005 policy limiting us to designated routes.

Sadly, it has not worked out as advertised. The 2005 Travel Rule was originally promulgated to address “un-managed” OHV use. Instead, the agency has used the rule to make landscape level changes to the existing road and trail infrastructure. This is in addition to a steady stream of legislation, litigation and other agency initiatives that, over the last 3 decades, has closed thousands of miles of roads and trails and tens of thousands of acres of snowmobile areas. Conversely, many millions of acres have been set aside for the exclusive use of non motorized visitors.

Recently, several travel plans completed by the San Juan National Forest have followed a very distressing pattern. First, through the process to eliminate cross country travel the agency closes a significant percentage of existing OHV opportunity. Once final, the environmental community steps in and seeks to close even more via litigation such is the case in the Rico/ West Dolores area where a law suit threatens to close 14 different trails that I personally have ridden for more than thirty years. The problem isn't limited to USFS lands. Proposed Bureau of Land Management, LRMP's for the Colorado Valley and Kremmling offices proposes closing 40 and 60 % of trails in those respective offices. They assert somehow, that there will be zero economic impacts from these closures. These are just horrible plans which will result in huge negative impacts to those communities

This sort of litigation is part of the problem with public lands management today. When planning doesn't go exactly the way someone or a group prefers they can easily mangle the process via lawsuits. The motorized community is deeply committed to improve the recreation experience for both motorized and non motorized users. We work with our public land managers and stake holders to improve trail opportunities and protect our natural resources. We have a strong OHV registration program which brings to the table more than 4 million dollars each year. This money is made available in the way of grants. These grants fund all aspects of trail maintenance. It is too bad that the environmental groups won't work with the motorized community to provide trails for all users instead of filing frivolous lawsuits. Lawsuits don't protect the environment. Working cooperatively with trail users will.

Regulations that limit access harms the elderly and disabled

According to numerous studies, including a comprehensive study on Wilderness prepared for Congress by Utah Representative Bill Orton,, most citizens including the elderly, children, most handicapped, and the poor are almost entirely excluded from use and enjoyment of federally managed lands by limiting vehicle access and facilities. The Bureau of Land Management's *National Management Strategy for Motorized Off-Highway Vehicle Use on Public Lands* shows that a major reason for the increase in popularity of OHV use is an aging population who find OHV recreation a enjoyable way to visit public lands. And, if I may speak for my family, I would implore the Subcommittee to recognize that, without vehicle access, my family is essentially locked out of vast areas of Colorado's public lands.

I will not say that I do not support managing some areas as “primitive,” where vehicles are not allowed. In fact, I have supported this type of management where it is appropriate. However, Colorado has a plethora of areas that are set aside for the exclusive use of people who prefer non-motorized recreation. Those of us who prefer, or are required to use vehicles for access and recreation are being squeezed into smaller and smaller areas. Each year, more and more of Colorado's scenic backcountry is available to those healthy enough to hike long distances.

Lack of effective response to the Bark Beetle outbreak questions the ability of the agency to properly manage its lands

According to a presentation our local USFS officials gave to the OHV community, the CITE HERE the total agency wide acreage affected by bark beetle (all beetles) since outbreak began in 1996 is 41.7 million acres. In Region 2 (Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota, Nebraska), some 10.7 million acres have been affected by bark beetle (all beetles) since outbreak began. Here in Colorado the agency estimates some 6.6 million acres are affected. The agency estimates that over the next 10 years, an average of 100,000 trees will fall daily as a result of the bark beetle epidemic.

Visitors to USFS lands are affected not only by the visual impacts. Falling trees pose serious risk to human life and the infrastructure our rural communities rely on. Dead trees across the state have created heavy fuel loading which can result in intense, so-called “fatal wildfires.” Beetle-killed trees now threaten thousands of miles of roads, trails and developed recreation sites. Our communities are also at risk. Beetle-killed forests now threaten essential water supplies and an estimated 550 miles of transmission and distribution power lines.

It is worthwhile to note the agency's own review of the Bark Beetle Outbreak in Northern Colorado and Southern Wyoming identifies Wilderness and Roadless as a contributing factor to the out-break and as a limiting factor as to how the agency can respond. Only a tiny fraction (less than 15%) of beetle-killed areas are open to any sort of active management to address the situation. This is because budgetary and regulatory limitations—such as prohibitions on entering roadless areas and designated wilderness areas preclude those efforts. And yet, Colorado's new Roadless Rule increased “upper tier” roadless areas to 1.4 million acres from the previous 550,000 acres.

To recreationists, this problem needs a solution. While many in the USFS seem to acknowledge the problem, an overburdened regulatory system delays any real action on the ground. When, in the rare circumstance, the agency does complete the necessary “analysis,” the litigious environmental groups step in. These well funded and philosophically driven groups seem to oppose even modest fuel reduction programs. Often they oppose any and all efforts to remove excessive fuel loads.

In closing while I don't claim to be an expert in forest health I am convinced that for us to have sustainable forests we must demand that the decisions that are made by our public land managers be made based on proven science not ideology or probability.