

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony on HR 1739 and HR 2149
U.S. REPRESENTATIVE DAVID MINGE (D-MN)
Before the
House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
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The Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) is the largest, most used wilderness in the United States. This federal preserve enables hundreds of thousands of people from all parts of our great nation to experience the pristine beauty of solitude of nature away from the stress and bustle of modern life. Even over-flights by aircraft are limited.

At least a dozen members of my family and I have visited the BWCA scores of times over the last 50 years. On a handful of these trips, they used motorized craft, but normally the use has been for paddling or cross country skiing. Similarly, many thousands of residents of my district and the rest of the country have experienced the beauty and wonder of this wilderness and have strong feelings about its use.

Motorized traffic at the borders of the BWCA and along the international divide have long been a source of contention. Congress has often been urged to redefine the rules by advocates for motorized and canoe interests. Emotions run high. Claims escalate. A consensus accommodation seems impossible.

Two of our House colleagues have introduced legislation in the 105th Congress. Representative Oberstar has an outstanding record of working to improve our nation's environment; he has been a tireless advocate for a strong Clean Water Act. Representative Vento has a parallel commitment and is a champion of our national parks and wilderness system. Despite common ideals, the Minnesota Congressional Delegation is in sharp disagreement over the boundary waters. It is tragic that bitterness has developed among the people of Minnesota over this beautiful region.

The Oberstar bill allows motorized transport over three portages -- motorized transport which had been banned by a 1992 court ruling -- and retracts a provision of the 1978 act which, if left unchanged, reduces motorized boat use in Seagull Lake from 100 percent to 21 percent effective in 1999. That provision was, in 1978, considered to be a means of striking a compromise between the competing interests.

The Vento bill prohibits the use of any motorized vehicles to transport boats at any portage in the BWCA and expands the BWCA area to include 7,370 acres of additions to the wilderness.

As tempting as it is to jump into this controversy, I urge my colleagues to leave the matter alone. There are several reasons:

1. Traditional but ever increasing commercial use of the BWCA is intensive and cannot be further limited without inciting bitterness in those who strongly believe present motorized access is fundamental to their enjoyment of the area and their economic well being. Those same groups

- strongly oppose the courts' interpretation of the present law closing motorized portages.
2. Wilderness advocates are equally resentful and believe that the wilderness experience is interrupted by motors. They point to the thousands of other lakes in Minnesota with no limit on motors and the increasing demand on the BWCA by canoeists. They point out that, today, the economic opportunity for the BWCA region as a wilderness surpasses the motorized opportunities of yesterday and that our society's need for this place of solitude is increasing each year. They also emphasize that a deal was struck when Congress passed the 1978 Legislation. At a minimum, we should accept that conciliation.
 3. Motorized use is not compatible with wilderness canoe experience. The noise of the engines that accompanies heavy boat traffic interrupts the quietude of nature. The speed of the motor boat leaves the canoeist in the wake, trivializing the accomplishments of one's personal effort.
 4. Each portage where motorized vehicles are allowed to operate funnels more and more boat traffic into that portage area. This -- the operation of both the motorized vehicles and the boats -- compounds the frustration of those who have journeyed to the area in search of the wilderness experience.
 5. Every area of lakes that is open to motorized use has the effect of discouraging canoe use of that part of the lake. There is no "free" use. More intrusive use drives out less intrusive use.
 6. Keeping the present limits on motorized use within the BWCA, as provided in the current law as interpreted by the courts, is the fairest course of action and will minimize the change that Congress will constantly be called upon to micro-manage this area. Unless the contending parties are able to agree on a consensus bill, let's leave well enough alone.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I urge that this committee give this controversy the studied attention, thoughtful reflection and clarity of action that characterizes the still, pure waters of this wilderness treasure. If it does, I am confident it will do nothing to compete with the haunting beauty of the loon's call.