

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Statement / Witness Testimony

**Committee on Resources,
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Oversight Hearing on the Effect of the New Forest Service Rules on National Forest Recreation
Testimony of Ron Scott, Senior Conservation Associate, Izaak Walton League of America
Tuesday, April 4, 2000**

Madame Chair, I am Ron Scott, senior conservation associate for the Izaak Walton League of America -- which is one of the oldest and most respected voices for responsible conservation policy in America. We very much appreciate this opportunity today to come discuss the issues relating to recreation on the nation's National Forests.

This is a special opportunity, because today I have a brand new survey to present to the subcommittee from the Izaak Walton League of America and five other leading hunter/angler conservation organizations - Mule-Deer Foundation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Trout Unlimited, Wildlife Forever, and the Wildlife Management Institute. Each of the organizations are Trustees of the newly formed Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Alliance (TRCA) that commissioned the survey. The study, which was conducted by Responsive Management -- the world's leading public opinion research firm on natural resources and outdoor recreation issues -- is a survey of hunters by hunters. It surveys licensed hunters, randomly chosen, that have hunted on one of our great national forests sometime within the past two years. It is not some abstract, theoretical exercise. Rather, it is a survey of people who use the national forests, know the landscape, and are aware of the impacts of roads and roads management on the fish, wildlife and other natural resources they value.

I would like to submit a copy of the survey for the record and would like you know that it clearly states whom we have talked to, what we asked them and how we asked the questions. Responsive Management has an exemplary reputation and an extraordinary record of accomplishment. During the past fifteen years, they have conducted more than 500 surveys and focus groups for a variety of conservation groups, including the National Rifle Association, Safari Club International, Izaak Walton League of America, as well as many universities and almost every state fish and wildlife agency in the country.

Responsive Management's survey found no evidence that the vast majority of hunters want any more permanent roads in our national forests. In fact, 83% of the hunters surveyed support keeping existing roadless areas in our National Forests in their current roadless state. It should be noted that 26% of those surveyed belong to the NRA, 34% belonged to other national hunting or wildlife conservation organizations, such as the Izaak Walton League of America, and 53% did not belong to any hunting or conservation organization.

Our survey also found indications as to why the majority of hunters do not want more roads in roadless areas. For example, 86% of those surveyed thought that "providing hunting opportunities in remote areas with few roads and few other people [was] important" and only 10% said it was "unimportant". Similarly, 88% of hunters felt that "providing places for solitude and natural experiences [was] important " and again, only 10% found this to be "unimportant".

Hunters understand the adverse impact roads can have on water quality and the health of fish and wildlife populations, as well. According to the survey, 98% found protecting water quality to be important and 97% believe that improving fish and game habitat management is important. Anglers also share this view which was confirmed by the results of a January 2000 survey conducted by Responsive Management for the TRCA revealing that 99% of anglers surveyed felt that protecting water quality was an important value associated with national forests.

There has been a great deal of rhetoric to the effect that the Forest Service is attempting to "lock out" the public from the national forests. The results of our survey, however, suggest that the real "lock out" for hunters is occurring on private land. Although less than a third (30%) of hunters felt that it has become more difficult to gain access to public hunting lands, 65% felt it had become more difficult to gain access to private hunting lands. Thus, twice as many hunters feel it is becoming more difficult to gain access on private than they do on public lands.

These findings come as no surprise to us at the Izaak Walton League of America. Traditionally and to this day, a significant portion of our membership hunts, fishes or otherwise recreates on lands managed by the Forest Service, including those portions of the National Forest System that remain roadless. Our conservation policies are democratically established by our members, who for decades have consistently supported maintaining a significant and representative portion of the nation's public lands "in their natural, wild condition for the enjoyment and education of people and for scientific purposes." Specifically, League policy states that roadless areas, including lands formally designated as Wilderness, should be managed "to control recreational use, overcrowding and damage to environmental values." In addition, the League believes that "[a]ll public lands should allow for a range of outdoor recreation opportunities consistent with other values and uses, although not every type of recreation need be accommodated on every public land area." (emphasis added).

However, I should point out that our members do part company with a few of our environmental colleagues regarding the issue of active management of forest resources. We believe that some management activities, including limited logging, use of prescribed fires, and construction of temporary roads may be appropriate in certain situations where there is a legitimate need to conduct fish and wildlife habitat improvements or manage forests -- even within roadless areas. For example, there are opportunities to improve habitat conditions by reducing unnatural stand densities, excessive fuel loads and insect infestations through the use of stewardship contracts rather than commercial logging contracts. Groups like the Flathead Forestry Project have shown that this can be done in a responsible manner that both conservationists and loggers can agree on.

In closing, I wish to again thank the Chair and the subcommittee for the opportunity to share our views on the importance of roads management and roadless areas within the National Forest System to America's sportsmen and sportswomen. As we begin the next century, the League believes it is essential for the Forest Service to proceed with the long-overdue task of developing a comprehensive and scientifically defensible plan to manage both roadless areas and the forest roads system. We look forward to working with the subcommittee and the Forest Service toward this end.

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