



Testimony

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Legislative Hearing on the Sportsman's Heritage and Recreational Enhancement Act" (SHARE Act)

**Federal Lands Subcommittee
Committee on Natural Resources
US House of Representatives**

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My Name is Christopher Sharon and I currently serve as the Chief Operating Officer of a nation-wide Veteran Service Organization called Hope For The Warriors that provides direct services to more than 12,000 service members, veterans, their families and families of the fallen. In addition to the current billet in which I am privileged to serve, I am a US Marine combat veteran of both Iraq and Afghanistan where I had the distinction to serve as a Scout Sniper Team Leader. I also own a small defense-contracting firm that provides tactical training to the DOD, Federal & local Law Enforcement and to the civilian population, and am a federally licensed dealer in firearms to include NFA controlled items.

I have been asked to testify about how better and broader access to federally protected and managed lands can be beneficial to the more than 18 million¹ veterans that currently reside in the US.

ABOUT HOPE FOR THE WARRIORS: For the past 11 years, Hope For The Warriors has been dedicated to serving those who have served. As a Veteran Service Organization, we provide a full-cycle of care to restore self, family, and hope to post-9/11 service members, their families, and families of the fallen.

OUR MISSION: We believe those touched by military service can succeed at home by restoring their sense of self, family and hope. Nationally, Hope For The Warriors provides comprehensive support programs for service members, veterans and military families that are focused on transition, health and wellness, peer engagement and connections to community resources.

A SENSE OF PRIDE AND PROTECTION: The goal of Hope For The Warriors is to positively impact individuals who have experienced injuries while serving our country. Sometimes those injuries are physical in nature, such as the loss of a limb. Many times, they are emotional, such as PTSD.

¹ <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk>

And many more are unseen by outward appearances, including a feeling of loss when it comes to transitioning back to civilian life, without the camaraderie the military provides. Which can result in alienation from loved ones, and in most extreme cases, can contribute to suicide.

Our programs also cater to those who care for injured service members. These caregivers have their own fight and individual sets of needs. Sacrifices are not only made by our service members but by their spouses and children as well. Again, Hope For The Warriors is there to help.

Hope For The Warriors treats each client who enters our program as an individual, taking his or her own circumstances into account. The end goal is to surround those individuals with a community of support, which includes our trained staff (65% of us are veterans), other veterans and active duty military, volunteers and mentors who hold our service members in highest regard, as well as members of the client's local community.

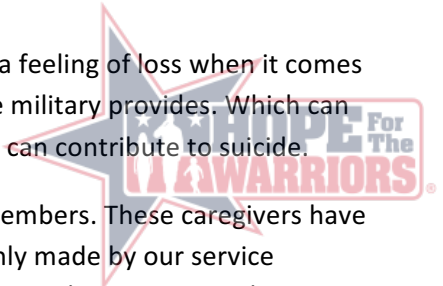
Everyone associated with Hope For The Warriors is at the very least patriotic, but our commitment goes well beyond pride. We support those who have sacrificed to protect our country, its unique natural resources and our citizen's privilege to enjoy them.

WHY OUTDOOR RECREATION AND CONSERVATION MATTER TO US: Each individual who seeks assistance from Hope For The Warriors enters into our well-being program in a variety of ways. One of the most popular entry points is through our Outdoor Adventures Program in our Sports & Recreation pillar. Hunting and fishing opportunities play a key role in our Outdoor Adventures Program and are the most requested activities by service members who come to Hope For The Warriors.

We created the Outdoor Adventures Program in 2010 to provide adaptive opportunities for wounded heroes to participate in sporting activities in the great outdoors. In 2012, the organization recognized the therapeutic benefits for the family members and expanded the program to include spouses and children of wounded and fallen service members.

Hope For The Warriors' Outdoor Adventures Program provides adaptive opportunities for wounded heroes to participate in sporting activities in the great outdoors. Service members, who previously embraced an outdoorsman lifestyle, as well as those new to traditional outdoor sports, like hunting and fishing, find peace, solace and restoration in these activities and, in many cases, use them as a catalyst to re-engage with their spouses and children enabling Post Traumatic Growth. Over the lifespan of the program, thousands from the military community have participated in Outdoor Adventures. However, proximity to opportunities for service members remains our greatest hurdle in facilitating participation.

In my own personal experience, I have seen the incredibly powerful results of these kinds of activities. The intangible benefits of being outdoors; The spiritual recovery that come with an intimate connection to nature; The camaraderie that hunting and fishing brings all contribute to these results. Opening federally managed lands to veterans would greatly increase the access





and opportunities to experience the incredibly powerful healing nature, and activities therein, can provide to our heroes. These are some of the reasons we are speaking in favor of portions of the Sportsmen's Heritage And Recreational Enhancement Act.

CONSERVATION AND HEALTHY LANDS: While Hope For The Warriors is not a conservation group, we value healthy habitat and support funding to acquire lands and maintain our country's natural resources, such as what's outlined in North American Wetlands Conservation Extension (Title XIII).

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS: As Hope For The Warriors carries out our Outdoor Adventure Programs, we are mindful of the physical, financial and emotional frameworks our service members live in. Any time we can remove external barriers, we are free to focus on the individual's journey and recovery. We champion the right to use our fishing tackle and ammunition of choice (Title I), to safely transport bows across national park service lands (Title VI), to access public fishing spots managed by state wildlife agencies (Title VIII), and to legally transport sporting arms and ammunition across state lines (Title XI).

Also important to Hope For The Warriors in breaking down barriers is the Hearing Protection Act (Title XV).

Hearing loss is common for those who have trained and served in our military.

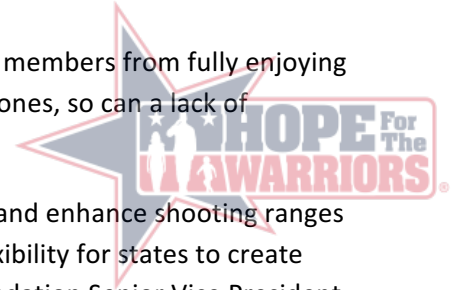
Nearly one-half million US veterans are currently receiving over \$1 billion annually in Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) compensation for hearing loss. As a result, hearing loss is the most common service-connected disability. Traditionally, most hearing loss associated with military service has been caused by high intensity and/or impulse noise. In recent years, an increasing number of US service members have hearing loss as a result of being in proximity to the detonation of explosive devices in the Iraq and Afghanistan operations. For example, deployment has been observed to increase the risk of hearing loss, with 71% of soldiers returning from Iraq or Afghanistan reporting exposure to loud noise, and more than 15% of returnees reporting ringing in their ears.²

Preserving what remains our heroes' hearing, while still giving them the opportunities to live a full life is our goal.

The use of silencers is a tool for many who seek to continue to hunt or reconnect with nature. Hope For The Warriors advocates removing any barriers, such as taxes on making, transferring, using, possessing or transporting a firearm silencer. We also seek equal treatment of firearms and silencers, as both are tools for a satisfying and healthy hunting experience.

² <http://www.noiseandhealth.org/article.asp?issn=1463-1741;year=2015;volume=17;issue=74;spage=34;epage=42;aulast=Wells>

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES: Just as barriers can limit our service members from fully enjoying the outdoors in their efforts to reconnect with nature and loved ones, so can a lack of opportunities.



Allowing Pittman-Robertson funds to be used to build, maintain and enhance shooting ranges on federal/public lands (Title II) provides more resources and flexibility for states to create facilities for recreational shooters. National Shooting Sports Foundation Senior Vice President and General Counsel Lawrence Keane says:

“Public shooting ranges provide hunters a place to sight in rifles and shotguns before hunting seasons, for people to take firearm safety and hunter education courses and, for recreational target shooters to enjoy their sport. Target shooters are largely responsible for the funds derived through excise taxes from the sale of firearms and ammunition products. That money is directly responsible for habitat conservation, recreational shooting and wildlife management, making gun owners, hunters and manufacturers the largest financial supporters of wildlife conservation throughout the United States.”

Ensuring that the Pittman-Robertson Act continues to maximize wildlife conservation and outdoor opportunities is something we certainly support.

And when it comes to planning public land/water use, whether it’s units of the National Park System, National Forest System, land owned by the United States and under the jurisdiction of BLM and Fish and Wildlife Service, we advocate the inclusion of hunting and fishing.

We believe the Recreational Fishing and Hunting Heritage Opportunities Act (Title IV) will do just as it says — provide more opportunities for our citizens to enjoy outdoor pursuits. As stated before, Hope For The Warriors’ Outdoor Adventures program is made up largely of hunting and fishing opportunities. However, as we cater to the individuals and families who seek our services, we must expand our outdoor offerings to include a variety of activities, such as hiking, paddle boarding, etc.

Public lands should also cater to an array of uses, as deemed sustainable, safe and environmentally healthy by the states that manage them. We simply want to ensure that hunting and fishing — the pursuits that largely fund wildlife conservation — are a viable consideration.

HELP US GIVE HOPE FOR THE WARRIORS: As you evaluate the wide variety of topics included in this bill, we ask that you remember the men and women who have sacrificed much for our country. Whether or not they are part of the Hope For The Warriors programs, we owe them the freedom to enjoy the outdoors in safety, with as few barriers and as many opportunities we can offer. For all of these reasons, Hope For The Warriors thanks you and urges passage of the Sportsmen’s Heritage and Recreational Enhancement Act. Thank you for your time and consideration and your desire to address these critical issues.