

# Committee on Resources

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## Witness Testimony

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Testimony on HR 1739 and HR 2149  
REPRESENTATIVE THOMAS BAKK  
Minnesota House of Representatives  
Before the  
House of Representatives  
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health  
September 9, 1997

Thank you, Madam Chair, for the opportunity to testify to the Committee today. Also, thank you for bringing your Subcommittee to Northern Minnesota earlier this summer to experience firsthand the arduous task of manually pushing a boat over the Trout Lake portage, referenced in HR 1739. I was honored to have the opportunity to participate with you in the field trip.

My name is Thomas Bakk. I make my home on Lake Vermilion near Cook, Minnesota, only nine miles from the Trout Lake truck portage. I represent District 6A in the Minnesota Legislature. The entire area, known as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW), is within my legislative district. I am pleased to have been afforded this opportunity to convey to the Committee what I strongly feel to be the facts as they relate to the truck portage issue contained in HR 1739.

Much of my legislative district is located on Minnesota's Iron Range, a place where the people have a proud heritage of contributing to the continuation of the free world as we know it. A place wherein the decades around the turn of the century the region's iron ore produced 75% of the world's steel. You'll often hear people cite John Rockefeller when he reportedly said, "if it had not been for Minnesota's Iron Range, Germany would have ruled the world." Much of this ore was mined in the cities of Ely and Tower-Soudan, communities on the edge of the wilderness.

The city of Virginia, another Range community on the perimeter of the BWCAW, was once home to the world's largest white pine sawmill, producing one million board feet a day -- lumber that built many of our cities all across America.

Mining and timber are still today the major economic engines of Northern Minnesota's economy. Our people toil hard in a battle with nature, especially in the winter when temperatures often reach -50 Fahrenheit and wind chills of -100 are commonplace; many are outside in the elements working to add value to the natural resources so others in our nation can enjoy the benefits of paper, wood products and steel.

The people of my district are proud, hard-working citizens of our country. I strongly feel that our government has not always been fair with them. The area known as the Boundary Waters has had a long tradition of motorized use. In 1964 came the Wilderness Act, and much of the motorized use by the area's residents was curtailed. The region's people were told by Senator Hubert Humphrey that there would not be any further restrictions on motor use.

The preservationists hadn't taken enough yet and in 1978 came PL 95-495. We lost hundreds of thousands of acres of timber resource, as Congress said no more logging. Also, no more snowmobiling, a popular winter sport, and motors will only be allowed on 18 lakes. The three motorized truck portages were allowed to remain.

The people of the region adjusted. Many left the area in the 1980s, as mining took a cyclical downturn and many timber jobs had been eliminated by the 1978 Act. The region downsized and by the late 1980s, the people left in the region felt some comfort that the attacks on their culture and livelihoods had subsided. Then another attack -the preservationists were successful in federal court and the motorized portages, promised to the people by Congress, were closed.

The people of Northern Minnesota and the Iron Range want the promises of the 1978 Act restored. These people have and continue to make their contribution to the health and prosperity of our nation; all they ask is for our government to keep its word. This can be done with the passage of HR 1739.

These truck portages have been in existence as long as anyone can remember and for a very specific reason, access for sport fishing. The lakes that are made accessible by the truck portages, Trout and Basswood, are two of the premier fishing resources in all of Minnesota. Fishing is made much safer, more enjoyable and is much more productive when practiced from a boat. For decades the residents of this region have fished these lakes, for many a culture and a family heritage has evolved over the years as the tradition is handed down from one generation to the next.

I'm always reluctant to cite statistics, most times it seems numbers have a hard time creating sensitivity and understanding about issues; however, I feel compelled to share with you some demographic information about Ely, Minnesota, the largest community in my legislative district. I hope when you study them you will come to understand why the motorized truck portages are so vital to recreational sport fishing for the people who live in Ely, Tower-Soudan and the region.

Ely, like many rural communities, despite tireless work by economic development authorities, has been experiencing difficult times. The community population, once over 6,000, now numbers less than 4,000. The number of students enrolled in school continues to decline. Class sizes of 150 in the 1970s have been replaced by graduating classes one-half as large in the 1990s. Projected enrollment looks even more dismal, with only 40 students enrolled in kindergarten this year and as few as 33 in upcoming years.

While the median age of a resident of the state of Minnesota is 32.5 years; in Ely the age is 43. Statewide 12.5% of our population is over 65 years of age. In Ely 29.3% of our residents are over 65. Statewide 10.2% of our people live in poverty; in Ely over 20% of our residents live below the poverty line. The median household income in Minnesota is \$30,909; in Ely the household income is \$15,642.

These numbers provide a profile of the Ely community. Other communities in my district are similar. These are communities where residents are much older, more are retired, more live in poverty and incomes are much lower than the rest of the state.

Because these people are much older, they need the assistance of the truck portages to access the lakes they have been fishing for decades. Because they are of lower income, fishing near home is one of the recreations they can afford to do with their families. Few of our people have the financial resources to travel to popular vacation spots outside of Minnesota. Our children hold fast memories of family fishing trips to lakes like Trout and Basswood.

Boats provide the only opportunity families have to fish safely together. If you have never seen the look or felt the excitement in a young child's eyes as they recount a day's fishing adventure, you truly have missed one of life's most rewarding moments. The passion for passing on the heritage runs deep in the hearts of the people of Northeastern Minnesota.

For most families the premier fishing opportunities afforded by Trout and Basswood Lakes are now gone - taken away by a technical definition of the word 'feasible' by a federal judge.

It's wrong, it's unfair, it's unjust. The closing of the truck portages is anti-elderly, it's anti-family, it's anti-anybody with a disability or handicap.

These premier fishing lakes have now been reserved for the physically elite, and that is un-American.

The Vento bill, HR 2149, is a callous attack on the people of Northeastern Minnesota. Over 80% of my legislative district is governmentally owned. Adding additional acreage will further diminish our property tax base and reserve more of our timber resource, further damaging our natural resource-based economy.

The elimination of tow boats, used to disperse visitors, will increase congestion on lakes where they are currently permitted. And, finally, the elimination of motorized use on Lac La Croix and Loon Lakes is ludicrous. We share these lakes with Canada along our international boundary, and the Canadians allow motorized use. Common sense would dictate it ridiculous to draw an imaginary line down a lake and allow motors on one portion but not the other. The entire text of HR 2149 is more of the same old war on the people of Northern Minnesota. I urge its rejection.

The Oberstar bill, HR 1379, is not anti-wilderness, as many portray it to be. It does not increase motor horsepower; It does not increase the number of lakes where motorized use is permitted; it does not in any way degrade the wilderness. The reopening of the truck portages simply restores congressional intent and honors the commitment made to the people of Northeastern Minnesota by our own late Senator Hubert Humphrey and the 1978 Act.

This bill is not about mining, it's not about logging or commercial development. The issue at hand is clear and simple - the people of Northeastern Minnesota want reasonable access to go fishing into two lakes they cherish very much.

I ask this Committee to please work bipartisanly when deciding how to vote on this measure. This is a very sensitive Issue to the people of Northeastern Minnesota, and they deserve your careful thought and utmost consideration.

Thank you.

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