

# **Committee on Resources, Full Committee**

- - Rep. James V. Hansen, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6201 - - (202) 225-2761

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## **Witness Statement**

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**Statement of Bruce Ward  
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**Presented to the Congress of the United States**

**US House of Representatives House Resources Committee**

**May 18, 2001**

**Subject:**

**Recreation and Public Access to Federal Lands**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the House Resources Committee. I appreciate this opportunity to address you about recreation and access to public lands. I have been working on the effort to complete and maintain the Continental Divide Trail since 1994. My wife, Paula, and I helped to form the Continental Divide Trail Alliance with then vice chair of the National Forest Foundation Steve Fausel. Our organization was specifically formed to assist the Forest Service, National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management with the congressional mandate to complete and maintain this national treasure.

### **Introduction**

Our great country is made up of a people proud of our individualism, proud of our heritage and proud of our pioneering spirit.

Yet today there is less opportunity for Americans to experience our natural lands as our forefathers did. As we move from a rural to an urban society, we must seek ways to connect people to the land.

One such connection is our National Trail System. I have the privilege of representing the Continental Divide Trail, which, along with the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail constitute the crown jewels of America's long distance primitive trails. The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail wraps its spirit and soul around the hearts of all Americans who remember the history of the making of the West and who look with hope to the continuance of the pioneer spirit. It is our hope, in an age of political and social polarization, that people from all walks of life, cultures, environmental perspectives, and ethnic backgrounds find in the Trail the history of America and hope for our future.

When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark crossed the Continental Divide, it was a defining moment in history for both these intrepid explorers and our country. The Continental Divide has always been profoundly defining in the hearts and souls of the American people. How often do we as citizens and do you

as our Representatives have the opportunity to support something so grand as to tie together our past and our future with such majesty of time and place?

We recognize the honor, duty and priceless gift of living free in this land we call our home. What price is placed on the enhancement of the soul? What is the value of things which bring unity to our changing community of citizens? Can we think of a gift of greater value or a treasure more deserving of protection than the education of future generations of young Americans to the value and heritage of pristine public lands?

A trail of history, freedom and the American spirit is what we are charged to pass to future generations. I am here before you today representing those among us who believe we are better Americans because of what joins us together as opposed to what separates us.

With this understanding of what our organization stands for I would like to address the issue of recreation and access to our public lands.

Recreation on public lands is a benefit that Americans value. The issues we address here involve what types and extent of access are appropriate to maintaining the integrity of a natural resource.

We depend upon the public servants from our land management agencies to determine what natural settings are appropriate for certain types of recreational use based upon administrative or legislative designation, but it is our responsibility to adhere to those guidelines.

We must consider the impacts that different types of use have on these resources, as well as their effects on other users. Different types of trails and trail lands may accommodate a public with varied interests, yet they must do so in a manner compatible with the land.

One specific way of addressing the need for achieving a balance between protection and recreation needs is a toolkit approach for land protection. While "Big W" Wilderness is one useful tool, one size does not fit all, as many areas of open space worthy of protection from development simply would never make it through the designation process to qualify as Wilderness. National Conservation Area (NCA) designation provides a much more flexible vehicle.

Two recent NCA designations in Colorado have done an excellent job of protecting large areas while providing for a range of recreation activities. Under their guidelines, smaller Wilderness area designations were embedded within them, but the entire NCA areas would never have made it through the Wilderness designation process. The NCAs are the Gunnison Gorge section of the recent Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park legislation and the Colorado Canyonlands NCA just west of Colorado National Monument. There are another dozen or more NCAs that have been designated over the past 20 years or so.

Ideally we could develop some kind of organic legislation for National Conservation Areas that is similar to the Wilderness Act. This would legitimize this very useful tool in the eyes of a wide range of Americans as an appropriate form of land protection to complement Wilderness designation. It would also provide a workable alternative to the insistence of some for "Wilderness or nothing" that can too often result in very little Wilderness and a lot of nothing.

Recreation represents an increasing and important use of our public lands--one that merits increased resources and attention. As the increasing demands on our public lands continue, additional resources must

be allocated for recreation and conservation investment.

Recreation on our nation's public lands is significant--combined estimates among the four agencies total over 1.2 billion visitors annually. The Forest Service estimates they have 850 million visitors per year; the National Park Service attracts 287 million; and the Bureau of Land Management and the Fish and Wildlife Service estimate 65 million and 35 million, respectively.

In 1999, a study conducted for the Outdoor Recreation Coalition of America found that 94.5 percent of the American public participated in some form of outdoor recreation. And, according to the 2000 National Survey on Recreation and the Environment, hiking and backpacking are among the nation's fastest growing forms of recreation. In 2000, 73 million Americans hiked (a 196% growth since 1982) and 23 million backpacked. Despite these trends, federal funding for recreation has not kept pace with demand and continues to fall far short of needs.

Increased opportunities and access to the outdoors--where appropriate--will strengthen the public's appreciation and connection to the natural world. It will make us healthier. Convenient access to trails will make their homes more valuable.

It is paramount that the agencies utilize our trails as a means to educate the public about conservation issues and as a way to increase recreational opportunities and access. Trail protection and natural resource conservation are inextricably linked. However, trail systems built over the last 150 years with taxpayer dollars have been left to deteriorate, been abandoned, or simply left off of trail system maps, often at the sole discretion of an overworked seasonal trail worker.

The outdoor recreation community supports more recreation staff on the ground, more trail maintenance dollars, more funding for recreation and Wilderness management and programs that create more recreation opportunities for the American people.

Federal land managers are struggling to keep up with the dramatic increase in trail use in America. The solution is not to merely appropriate more money to the National Park Service (NPS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and USDA Forest Service, but to couple targeted increased funding with increased on-the-ground trails coordinators and volunteer coordinators.

## **Bureau of Land Management**

Increasingly, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has had to address the needs of a growing and changing West. The BLM lands in the West are experiencing unprecedented growth in recreational use as a result of rapid population growth and the expansion of communities within and outside major metropolitan areas. This growth increases the demands on adjacent public lands, user conflicts and management costs of public lands.

Outdoor recreation is an important public use of these lands and management of outdoor recreation resources, facilities, and visitor use are significant components of the BLM's multiple use mission, yet the agency remains severely underfunded and understaffed.

## **National Park System**

The National Park System (NPS) continues to grow, both in terms of the number of units it oversees and the number of visitors it accommodates each year. This growth in the system has not been accompanied by sufficient increases in financial resources and support. Years of inadequate funding have contributed to the deterioration of natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources throughout the system. Recreation and conservation funding increases are critical to enable the Park Service to protect its magnificent wealth of resources and continue to offer outstanding recreational opportunities.

The National Park Service faces the challenge of protecting resources while serving visitors. Recreation is integral to its role and mission. Yet, despite its tremendous role in recreation, the agency lacks senior-level administrative support and personnel focused strictly on recreation. As a result, recreation planning and management receive inconsistent attention and limited policy guidance. Recreation management requires greater emphasis from NPS headquarters rather than through individual parks and units alone. The prevalence of recreation today, exploding visitation to national parks, and the emergence of user conflicts warrant national policy direction and attention from the agency. We believe recreation deserves a higher place in the NPS hierarchy.

### **NPS and the National Trails System**

National Trails System funding increases during the past eight years have not kept pace with the needs for the system today. The 16 national scenic and historic trails administered by the National Park Service require increased funding for natural and cultural resource management and protection, improving visitor services, and strengthening volunteer partnerships. For most of the national scenic and historic trails, barely one-half of their congressionally authorized length and resources are protected and available for public use. Most trail offices are understaffed, hindering the agencies' ability to properly administer and manage these trails and work effectively with volunteer-based organizations.

### **USDA Forest Service**

The USDA Forest Service is the nation's largest outdoor recreation provider, managing over 133,000 miles of trails--including all or part of six national scenic and eleven national historic trails--more than 277,000 heritage sites, over 4,300 campgrounds, and 31 national recreation areas, scenic areas, and monuments. Recreation creates about 75% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) generated from Forest Service land, yet only about 10% of the Forest Service budget supports recreation.

The Forest Service itself now highlights the growing importance of recreation to the agency, as evidenced by the release of a Recreation Agenda.

The Recreation Agenda identifies resource protection, reducing the \$812 million trail maintenance backlog, and augmenting recreation staff and volunteer coordinators, particularly on the ground, as critical. Despite the increased emphasis the agency is placing on recreation through the Recreation Agenda, we are concerned that the concept as articulated at the top is not translating into action on the ground. Few national forests have even one full-time trails coordinator. And despite the number of hiking and other recreation organizations that want to volunteer to build and maintain trails in National Forests, few Ranger Districts have a volunteer coordinator. The American Hiking Society and some its member clubs, including the Continental Divide Trail Alliance, have had volunteer trail crews turned away because of the agency's inability to provide the necessary minimal supervision or support.

As expressed in the Recreation Agenda, the Forest Service highlights staffing and acknowledges the need to place trail coordinators, volunteer coordinators and/or recreation planners at each national forest and for each nationally designated area or trail. The agency must follow-through with this commitment by increasing funding for recreation staff on the ground.

## **Wilderness**

Wilderness areas are particularly important to recreationists seeking solitude and escape in pristine backcountry and other outstanding natural areas. Maintaining the integrity of the land and resources is essential for ecosystem viability and to assure these places remain wild for future generations. Wilderness areas are critical for ecosystem protection, for water, wildlife, and vegetation--all valued pieces of the recreation experience. The agencies must receive additional funding to manage Wilderness effectively and appropriately.

## **Volunteers**

In 2000, national trail volunteer organizations contributed \$6.6 million in financial resources and over 593,000 volunteer hours with an estimated labor value of \$8.8 million. The Forest Service relies very heavily on volunteers, especially for trail maintenance activities. Last year, over 90,000 volunteers contributed millions of hours in labor to the Forest Service with an appraised value of \$35.8 million. Clearly, these volunteer efforts warrant an expanded commitment to trails and recreation funding.

Our organizations have sent thousands of volunteers per year into America's public lands to revitalize trails and protect natural resources. These dedicated volunteers have raked, shoveled, trimmed, lopped, and chopped hundreds of trail miles that, without these crews, would be unsafe for travel. We send numerous crews into America's National Parks, Forests and rangelands each year.

These volunteer programs have expanded greatly over the years. As we have sought to expand these programs, we have found, more and more, that the public agencies do not have enough on-the-ground staff to supervise volunteers who want to work on trails - even where the agencies themselves have identified critical maintenance and repair work.

Adequately trained volunteer crew leaders would not replace Forest Service, NPS, or BLM staff as decision-makers, but instead would help the public land managers fulfill their responsibility to the recreating public, contributing significantly toward the goals set in the Recreation Agenda.

Congressional support for these endeavors will ensure that our organizations can continue our strategic efforts to work with volunteers and grassroots trails organizations to encourage increased volunteerism on public lands.

## **Willing Seller Legislation**

Willing seller legislation is critical to the completion and protection of our National Trail System and to ensuring access to opportunities for outdoor recreation and appreciation and enjoyment of the natural and historic resources there as Congress intended.

Willing-seller legislation would amend the National Trails System Act to provide federal authority to acquire land from willing sellers to complete nine of the twenty-two national scenic and historic trails

currently lacking this authority. Willing seller authority restores parity to the National Trails System and provides authority to protect critical resources along the affected trails.

It gives the Federal agencies administering the trails the ability to acquire land from willing sellers only. The legislation would not commit the Federal government to purchase any land or to spend any money but would allow managers to purchase land to protect the national trails as opportunities arise with funding appropriated through the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Without willing seller authority, federal trail managers' hands are tied when development threatens important links in the wild landscapes of the national scenic trails or in the sites that authenticate the stories of the historic trails. With willing seller authority, sections of trail can be moved from roads where hikers and other trail users are unsafe, and critical historic sites can be preserved for future generations to experience. Moreover, this authority protects private property rights, as landowners along the nine affected trails are currently denied the right to sell land to the federal government if they desire to do so.

The four national scenic trails included under willing seller legislation have a combined projected length of 9300 miles. Twenty years after their authorization, only about 4885 miles--slightly more than half their total length--are protected so they will be permanently available for public use and enjoyment. Without the ability to purchase permanent rights-of-way from willing sellers, it is highly unlikely that these trails will ever be the continuous pathways that Congress intends them to be.

Even though most of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail is on public land, there are several major gaps to fill in order to make the trail continuous from Canada to Mexico. Although most of the five national historic trails affected by this legislation are not intended to afford continuous routes for recreation, the degree of protection of their "significant sites and segments" mirrors the condition of the four scenic trails.

In March 2001, the House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed H.R. 834, the National Trails System Willing Seller Act, introduced by Representative Scott McInnis, by a 409-3 vote.

## **Education**

Trails can be a particularly valuable tool as the land management agencies stretch themselves further into education. They can serve as the classrooms for biology, history, geology, ecology and more. Our best guess is that there are well over 200,000 miles of trails in the US; all of them can teach us something.

## **Economic Benefits: A Growth Industry**

The number of Americans who participate in human powered activities such as hiking, canoeing, kayaking, mountain climbing, and bicycling, has increased substantially over the last two decades. Furthermore, the number of households in the U.S. is projected to increase by 12.3% by the year 2010 to a total of 113.4 million. As the number of households in the U.S. expands and interests in outdoor activities grow, demand for natural places, resources, and sports equipment and apparel will rise. As society's interest in outdoor recreation grows, so does the economic benefit of those activities.

## **Commerce and Jobs**

Across the United States, parks, rivers, trails, and recreational open space help support a \$502 billion

tourism industry--the nation's third largest retail sales industry. In 1993, 273 million visits to our national parks created over \$10 billion in direct and indirect expenditures within parks and surrounding communities. These expenditures also generated over 200,000 jobs. Well-managed trails running through communities can foster substantial, sustainable economic activity through business development and tourism. Trail users need food, lodging, and campgrounds as well as special clothes, shoes, and equipment.

A study of economic impacts of trails by the Allegheny Trail Alliance (a federation of seven trail groups working to build a 209-mile network of trails from Pittsburgh to Cumberland, Md.) estimates that approximately \$14.1 million- \$25 million will be cycled into local economies once the network is completed. In another study, the National Park Service found that three rail-trails in Iowa, Florida, and California contributed between \$1.2 million and \$1.9 million per year to their home communities.

## **Retail Values**

Hiking and outdoor recreation help boost the economy. The manufacturing of hiking boots, tents, backpacks, sleeping bags, and other related outdoor equipment has become a major job-creating industry. The Outdoor Recreation Coalition of America estimates that total current sales of human-powered outdoor recreation products and specialty items are over \$17.9 billion. Outdoor specialty retailers and chain stores accounted for \$4.78 billion of the total 1999 retail sales, which represents a 6.6 % increase from 1998. A recent study reveals that on average, \$374 million is spent on hiking footwear each year.

In addition, many of these companies find ways to give back to organizations like ours with generous donations of financial support, in-kind and products for our volunteers.

## **Property Appreciation**

Across the nation, parks, protected open space, and trails are increasingly recognized as vital to the quality of life that benefits economic health. According to a Regional Planning Association poll, the major elements cited as crucial for a satisfactory quality of life were low crime and access to greenery and open space. CEOs and owners of small companies ranked recreation/parks/open space as the highest priority in choosing a new location for their business.

Studies have supported the direct relationship between property values and proximity to greenways, trails, and open space. A 1996 survey of property values near greenbelts in Boulder, Colorado concluded that the average value of a home adjacent to the greenbelt would be 32 percent higher than the same property 3,200 feet from the greenbelt.

In Salem, Oregon, land adjacent to a greenbelt was found to be worth about \$1,200 an acre more than land only 1,000 feet away, and in Seattle, WA homes bordering the 12-mile Burke Gilman Trail sold for 6.5 percent more than other houses of comparable size.

## **Congestion Relief and Pollution Control**

Trails connect the community and can be an important part of the transportation system. The use of human-powered transportation by way of walking and bicycling could result in a savings of 17.9 billion motor vehicle miles, 7 billion gallons of gas, and 9.5 million tons of exhaust emissions annually.

## **Health Benefits**

Accessible, safe trails mean that more people will walk and hike, leading to both short- and long-term health benefits. Walking can prevent heart disease, decrease hypertension, decrease cholesterol levels, help weight loss, improve osteoporosis, improve and maintain mental health, prevent and control diabetes, improve arthritis, and relieve back pain. Trails provide a safe, inexpensive avenue for regular exercise for people living in rural, urban, and suburban areas. Studies show that walking or hiking a few times per week can improve a person's health and lower health care costs. In a study conducted by the National Park Service, individuals who exercised regularly filed 14 percent fewer healthcare claims, spent 30 percent fewer days in the hospital, and had 41 percent fewer claims greater than \$5,000 compared to those who lead sedentary lifestyles.

### **National Trails Day**

On June 2, 2001, American Hiking Society will coordinate its ninth "National Trails Day," to raise public awareness and appreciation for trails. Participants gather at more than 2,000 National Trails Day events nationwide.

### **Uniting Along the Divide II**

Hundreds of volunteers will travel to remote locations along the 3,100-mile CDT to explore and document in writing and with photographs its historical and geologic features. Information gathered during UAD II what is important to the CDT experience and take steps to protect these landmarks by developing a CDT Master Plan, a blueprint for the future of the trail.

### **Conclusion**

By increasing the focus and funding of the recreational programs outlined in this testimony, Congress will help ensure the viability of America's unique natural heritage and protect the outstanding recreation opportunities on our public lands.

Thank you, again. I will be happy to answer any questions from the committee.

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