



May 8, 2024

To: The Honorable members of the Subcommittee on Federal Lands

From: Luke Hilgemann

Subject: Testimony from IOTR on maintaining federal public land access for hunting, fishing, and other wildlife related pursuits.

Chairman Tiffany and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Federal Lands,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the critical issue of federal public lands access for hunters and anglers. My name is Luke Hilgemann, and I am the Executive Director of the International Order of T. Roosevelt (IOTR). Our organization is dedicated to upholding President Theodore Roosevelt's conservation legacy and advocating for the preservation of our sporting heritage.

Over the past several decades, the decline in hunter numbers is a troubling trend that cannot be ignored. In the last five years alone, American hunter numbers have decreased by 2 million. One of the top reasons cited by hunters for leaving the sport is the lack of access to public lands (Source: NSSF study 2021).

Why does it matter if we lose hunters? It matters because hunters are the lifeblood of funding for conservation. The North American Model of Conservation, lauded worldwide for its success in restoring and maintaining healthy populations of game and non-game animals, relies on the financial contributions of hunters, anglers, trappers, and recreational shooters. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in 2022 hunting, fishing, and other wildlife-related activities generated

\$394 billion in combined economic activity – securing public lands, habitat restoration, and the entire suite of wildlife conservation work across North America. (Source: 2022 FHWAR). It is a user-pay system, and it is the hunters, anglers, and trappers who willingly invest in licenses, stamps, and conservation efforts, benefiting us all.

However, the threats to our sports extend beyond access. Predator management is a critical issue that must be addressed to maintain healthy game populations and sustain hunting opportunities on federal public lands. A study conducted in Wisconsin revealed that wolves killed more deer than hunters in five northern counties, highlighting the need for effective predator control measures (Source: Deer and Deer Hunting 2019). Without proper management, our game species will suffer, and our hunting traditions will be jeopardized. After all, if there is no game to pursue on our public lands, access will no longer be the issue. We applaud the efforts of Subcommittee Chairman Tiffany and his colleagues for passing the Trust the Science Act, H.R. 764 bipartisan legislation that will return management of the recovered wolf populations to the states.

Another concerning issue is the lead bullet and hook ban recently passed by President Biden's administration. While environmental concerns are important, expanding the ban on lead bullets and fishing equipment will only exacerbate the decline in hunters and anglers. Lead ammunition has been affordable and widely accessible, enabling participation in our sports. Increasing costs and limiting options for ammunition will only discourage participation and hinder access to public lands. We applaud Rep. Wittman and his colleagues in the House of Representatives for passing H.R. 615 - the Protecting Access for Hunters and Anglers Act which establishes a process for evaluating the use of lead ammo and fishing equipment on federal public lands that allows for public input rather than blanket policies that deny public input.

To address these challenges and threats to our outdoor traditions, it is imperative that we prioritize the preservation and enhancement of public lands access for hunters, anglers, and other wildlife-related activities. IOTR has developed some suggested policy benchmarks for public land access for the Subcommittee to consider. These include:

1. **Responsible Management:** Encouraging coordination between federal agencies, state wildlife agencies, and local stakeholders to ensure that access decisions are made with the input of those who rely on these lands for hunting and fishing. Limit onerous land designations that often prohibit access for hunting, fishing, and other outdoor pursuits without clear justification.

2. **Balanced Conservation:** Recognizing that responsible hunting and fishing are integral components of effective wildlife management and conservation. By maintaining healthy populations of game species, we can also protect the habitats and ecosystems they depend on.

3. **Streamlined Permitting:** Simplifying the permitting process for hunting and fishing activities on federal lands, reducing bureaucratic hurdles, and ensuring timely access for sportsmen and women.

4. **Infrastructure Investment:** Allocating resources to improve and maintain access roads, trails, and facilities on federal lands, ensuring that hunters and anglers can reach their desired destinations safely and efficiently.

5. **Education and Outreach:** Promoting public awareness and education about the importance of hunting and fishing as conservation tools, fostering a sense of stewardship among current and future generations.

Taking these steps will ensure continued access and availability for hunters, anglers, and other recreational users to enjoy our greatest outdoor resources.

In conclusion, Chairman Tiffany and members of the Subcommittee, the threats to our sports are real and growing. The decline in hunter numbers, the need for effective predator management, and the potential impacts of lead bullet bans are all significant challenges that must be addressed. By prioritizing the needs of hunters and anglers, you can ensure the preservation of our natural resources, support local economies, and uphold the legacy of one of our nation's greatest conservationists, President Theodore Roosevelt.

Thank you for your attention, and I am ready to answer any questions you may have.

References :

1. Deer and Deer Hunting Magazine: "More Wolves Killed by Deer than hunters." December 2019.
2. "Making Public Lands Public: Access to Our Nation's Public Lands." 2023.
3. 2022 National Survey on Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation. U.S. Dept of Interior - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
4. Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. "Predation by Wolves on White-tailed Deer in Wisconsin: A Review and Meta-Analysis." 2017.