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May 13, 2024

Testimony for the House Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee on Federal Lands
“Improving Access and Opportunities for Hunting, Fishing, and Outdoor Recreation on
America’s Federal Lands.”

Chairman Tiffany, and Committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Henry Schienebeck, Executive Director of the Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association (GLTPA). GLTPA is a Michigan/Wisconsin organization representing 1,000 members with a mission of “Enhancing Multiple Use Forests for Future Generations.” I am also a member of the Federal Forest Resource Coalition Policy Committee and Legislative Chair for the American Loggers Council.

The national forest road system has several maintenance levels, all of which are designed to provide access to the forest for multiple use purposes. Most USFS roads in the Lake States Regions were built to provide access for timber harvest, which remains a major economic driver for the Lakes States and the United States. In addition, most recreational opportunities such as snowmobiling, off-road vehicle trails, hunting and fishing access are possible because of roads built for forest management.

According to the 1986 Chequamegon National Forest Plan the Forest Transportation system consisted of over 2,200 miles of Forest System Roads with an additional 231 miles of state and county Forest Service highways. In addition, a more comprehensive inventory showed that there were an additional 3,600 miles of low standard roads, mostly primitive two-track dirt roads that require a high clearance vehicle to traverse—which were not included in the roads inventory used for the 1986 Plan. With the inclusion of the 3,600 miles of uninventoried roads, the average Total Road Density for the Chequamegon Forest was estimated at 3.5 mi/sq. mile of forest in 1986.

Total Road Density measures the total miles of all open or closed roads per square mile of National Forest Land. This includes roads under jurisdiction of the FS as well as those managed by the state, county, and local governments, and other federal authorities.

Current access restrictions on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest (CNNF) are based on the 2004 Forest Plan which calls for a target forest wide road density of 3.0 mi/sq mile of forest, a reduction from the forest wide CNNF road density of 3.9 mi/sq mile of forest in the 1986 Forest Plan. In general, the road closures have been focused on non-motorized areas, low road density areas, wolf pack areas, and areas where roads were causing negative environmental impacts.

In November of 2004 the USFS released its final rule for Motorized Recreation in National Forest and Grasslands which began limiting access for recreational motor vehicles

including Off Highway Vehicles, (OHVs), all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), off-highway motorcycles (OHMs) and off-road vehicles (ORVs), such as 4-by-4 trucks or Jeeps. In 2008 the “Travel Management Rule” began a more intensive push to further reduce recreational motorized vehicle use access to national forest lands.

For the last three decades or more, the USFS has been consistently underfunded to meet its needs for Capital Improvements, Maintenance, and Roads (CMRD). The Forest Service estimates the current road maintenance backlog at \$5.3 billion. One significant budget decrease came during the 2013 “Sequester” which was supposed to be a 2.5% decrease across the board for all discretionary spending programs. Instead, it wound up being a 13% budget cut in the CMRD by the Obama administration from which the USFS has still not recovered. With flat or declining road budgets, the FS adopted a new transportation policy (Roads Analysis) with the objective of reducing the number of roads needing costly repair and maintenance. Beginning in 2000, the Roads Analysis is required for all project level management decisions including all forest wide analysis of higher standard roads.

As part of the development of a “Roads Analysis” process, improved technology has led to the development of more accurate estimates of total road densities. The current average road density, for instance, in the Chequamegon National Forest is 3.1 mi/sq mi and the Nicolet has a total road density of 4.9 mi/sq mi of road. To achieve the total road density target of 3.0 mi/sq mi of road on both forests, another 2% and 39% respectively will have to be decommissioned on the CNNF, which according to the final EIS will require a significant amount of time and funding to accomplish.

The final EIS for the CNNF Forest Plan states that “Achieving the road density upper limits set for the forests will require targeted road closures and obliterations to gradually reduce the number of roads traveled by public motorized vehicles. Road closures will affect only Forest Service roads; the Forest Service cannot close roads managed and maintained by State, County, or local authorities. Road closures and obliterations will focus on lower standard roads (Maintenance Level 2). The higher standard roads that comprise much of the forest road network will be largely unaffected by road closures, and many will remain open to licensed street vehicles. Recreationalists who enjoy driving lower standard roads will have fewer opportunities over time.”

As a representative of the forest industry and an avid sportsman, I am very concerned about recent and ongoing closures on Maintenance Level 2 roads and the movement toward the more expensive Maintenance Level 3 Roads, Maintenance Level 2 and 3 roads are described as follows:

Maintenance Level 2: Applies to infrequently traveled, primitive roads that are drivable by high clearance vehicles **or used for transporting timber**. These roads are usually too rugged for passenger car traffic.

Maintenance Level 3: Assigned to roads that are drivable by standard passenger cars. Most are single land roads designed for low-speed travel. Part or all of the roads may be surfaced with native or processed material.

Given the lower value of wood in the Lake States as compared to other parts of the county, Level 2 roads provide critical, economically feasible access to commercial timber and these are precisely the low maintenance roads which provide access for hunting and fishing activities. GLTPA would strongly question any move to require all logging roads to be built to Maintenance Level 3 standards. Doing so will drive up logging costs, reducing the competitiveness of the Lake States timber industry.

Higher standard roads could also lead to additional acres being restricted for access by recreational vehicles. Recreational vehicles operators are not necessarily known for being easy on road surfaces. The higher the value of the road surface such as that provided with the use of crushed gravel, the higher the maintenance costs. In addition, increased road costs could also make it easier to justify bypassing timber that may not have the highest on the stump value, but still needed for local markets and require management to maintain forest health as opposed to dropping them from consideration for treatment.

In examination of the forest plan what appears to be happening, is that Congress's failure to fully fund the USFS roads program has given the agency cause to have to place restrictions on roads having a significant investment in them to be used for future management activities. However, a person must question why there is so much time and money being spent to block the use of Level 2 roads built by the forest industry for logging operations, which in turn provides recreational opportunities until they are no longer passible because of natural regeneration.

The reality is that Congress's lack of funding is not only delaying needed forest management, but misdirecting scarce resources by forcing the FS to spend money closing roads when it should be expanding access for taxpayers. Recreation and healthy forests go hand in hand. For these to occur, it is essential that access roads on the landscape currently in place be made available for use by taxpayers.

Increased timber harvest focusing on economically viable timber sales that meet the needs of local industry, can generate revenue which could be used to repair existing roads while benefiting wildlife habitat and recreation. In the short to medium term, however, Congress should prioritize funding used for road maintenance and repair to provide not only access to timber, but provide hunters, anglers, outdoor recreationists, and first responders like firefighters and search and rescue greater access as well.

Thank you for your leadership on forestry issues, and I'd be happy to take any questions.