

Testimony of Chad Hixon, Trails Preservation Alliance

Representing the Trails Preservation Alliance

Before the

House Natural Resources Committee

Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Legislative Hearing on HR 7979

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Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Chad Hixon, Executive Director of the Trails Preservation Alliance in Colorado.

Trails Preservation Alliance

The Trails Preservation Alliance (TPA) exists to protect, support, and sustain the future of off-highway motorcycle recreation. We work to ensure that access, freedom, and adventure remain a part of our shared outdoor heritage by championing the responsible use, development, and preservation of trails systems on public lands. TPA protects trails for everyone (motorized and non-motorized), and we are working toward a future where riders and land managers work together to maintain a balanced, sustainable network of trails that are open, respected, and enjoyed for generations to come.

TPA fulfills our mission to protect trails for everyone through advocacy, education, community empowerment, and hands-on stewardship. The TPA Trail Crew, a \$450,000 investment entirely funded by the TPA in 2025, is the heartbeat of our on-the-ground efforts to protect and preserve multi-use motorized access on public lands. Driven by passion, fueled by community, and guided by respect for the land, the TPA Trail Crew works hand-in-hand with land managers to keep trails open, safe, and responsibly maintained. Every project strengthens not only the trail but the community of riders, families, and outdoor enthusiasts who depend on these routes now and in the future.

Our Trail Crew provides professional, reliable, boots-on-the-ground trail maintenance and construction support for multi-use motorized trail systems on public lands, filling in critical gaps for federal land managers and local trail organizations. In 2025, the TPA Trail Crew contributed over 4000 labor hours across 18 USFS Ranger Districts and BLM Field Offices in Colorado and Utah, tackling critical maintenance projects deep in the backcountry. To give you a picture, that looks like:

- 2,435 miles of trail ridden
- 810.5 miles of trail maintained
- 1568 trees cut out
- 156 hazard trees felled
- 478 drainages cleared
- 456 new drainages built
- 1493 feet of reroutes completed
- 3700 feet of reconstructed tread
- 46,372 feet of debris cleared
- 48,968 feet of corridor cleared
- 144 signs installed
- 284 trail contacts made

TPA is committed to turning advocacy into action—one shovel, one saw, and one mile at a time.

Open Unless Designated Closed and the 2005 Travel Management Rule

In our quest to protect motorized recreation and preserve access to America’s public lands for future generations, we’ve run into a roadblock.

Prior to 2005, trails and roads on public lands were generally open for all uses unless specifically marked as closed, as long as those uses complied with the existing land use plan. This “open unless designated closed” standard better reflects the multiple-use philosophy of agency authorizing statutes as well as long-standing common law and public access principles, and it provided widespread access to roads and trails for legal uses on the land, including hiking, biking, and motorized use for access to hunting, angling, and general recreation.

Then, in 2005 under the George W. Bush Administration, this assumption was reversed when the U.S. Forest Service issued its 2005 Travel Management Rule. The new rule put into place the opposite policy: all roads were considered closed unless they were posted as being open. Following the Forest Service’s lead, the Bureau of Land Management issued similar planning directives, creating the travel management planning that dictates road and trail management on federal lands today.

Problems and Consequences of Current Policy

With this new Rule, the Administration intended to *protect* existing open roads and trails from being closed by future administrations and to close illegal or user-made trails. Unfortunately, after 20 years of implementation, the Rule has had the opposite effect. Rather than protecting roads and trails for recreation, since 2005 there has been a significant decline in the number of roads and trails available for recreation. In addition, instead of getting rid of problematic illegal trails, the Forest Service has, in many cases, simply gotten rid of many popular *legal* trails used by the public, including official Forest Service system trails.

Worse, in many cases, existing system trails that had long been used for recreation and other purposes have been inadvertently closed because the Forest Service and BLM failed to identify them when conducting the initial inventory of existing roads required for Travel Management Plans. As Travel Management Plans have been revised, the number of trails presented in the “inventory” of existing roads and trails—the initial starting point for development of a TMP—has gone dramatically down, not because the agencies closed trails for good reason but simply because they overlooked them, failing to acknowledge they even existed. In effect, the easiest way to close a route is to never acknowledge it in the first place—because once it’s absent from the inventory, it is never analyzed, never evaluated, and ultimately defaults to closed without justification.

The Travel Management Plan for the San Rafael Swell is a good example of what happens when the agency fails to complete an accurate and comprehensive inventory of existing roads and trails before developing a Travel Management Plan. When Congress designated vast amounts of new BLM wilderness in Utah, it also created the San Rafael Swell Recreation Area, which was to remain accessible to motorized use. When BLM began the process of developing a Travel Management Plan for San Rafael Swell, however, not only did land managers fail to account for the fact that over 600,000 acres of land previously used for motorized recreation had been permanently closed through wilderness designation, but they didn’t fully account for existing trails within the new recreation area that had been in continuous use for decades leading up to the designation. Because BLM failed to develop an accurate inventory in this case, the “no action” alternative offered for public comment under the draft TMP actually omitted hundreds of miles of existing routes, and additional alternatives were based on incorrect information. The agency characterized its final decision as a responsible *increase* in motorized access, but at the end of the day it resulted in the default *closure* of existing routes that had gone unacknowledged and had never actually been evaluated.

This example has played out across the West, where a policy change that had no grounding in law but was purely administrative has resulted in the widespread closure of roads and trails that had historically been used by the public for access, recreation, and land stewardship. This places an unfair burden on the public and makes it nearly impossible to know if many routes are legally open or closed. Imagine if the roads and trails within a suburban neighborhood were managed this way. Even a trip to the supermarket could be cursed with a bewildering array of closures and timing restrictions.

Since 2005, the demand for trails has continued to rise, yet access continues to decline. For example, of the 28,351 total miles of trails in Colorado, only 8% are open to motorcyclists and Ebikes. Today nearly 50% of the public land in Colorado is currently restricted from motorized use—a number that continues to grow with each new land designation.

Lack of access has negatively impacted both the land and the communities that depend on it. As trail access becomes more limited, use is increasingly concentrated onto fewer routes. This

concentration places added strain on the trails that remain open, and the resulting resource impacts are often cited in support of additional closures - a cycle that could eventually lead to no motorized access at all. For example, in the last two years Utah has lost 1500 miles of trails, pushing a growing number of users onto an ever-shrinking number of trails. Virtually all use of public lands depends on motorized access. We need motorized access to manage lands for wildfire prevention and suppression, as well as conducting search and rescue and producing renewable energy, but current policy closes the door to all this critical access. As the number of roads and trails available to the public continues to decline, the communities that depend on recreation take the hit. In Colorado alone, the total economic contribution of off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreation amounted to \$2.9 billion in 2024, supporting nearly 18,700 jobs. This policy change needs to be changed back.

H.R. 7979, the Public Lands Access Restoration Act

This is why we support H.R. 7979, the Public Lands Access Restoration Act, which was introduced by Representative Crank earlier this month. This simple but important legislation would reinstate the previous policy of “open unless posted closed.”

Before the 2005 Travel Management Rule reversed the policy, motorized users could assume that a trail was open if it was not marked closed either with a sign or on an official map. This is the way we use public roads, assuming there is public access unless marked otherwise. Under current policy, however, users can't assume that a well-established trail with no indication of being closed is open for motorized use. They must verify the route on the Motor Vehicle Use Maps—from which, as I've pointed out, many frequently-used trails have been inadvertently dropped during land use planning—and are held in violation of federal law if they ride on non-designated routes.

The Public Lands Access Restoration Act restores the presumption that trails are open to motorized access unless they are marked closed, both with signage and on official maps. It doesn't prevent the agencies from closing trails; it simply requires that they do so through a public process and based on clear and convincing evidence that the closure is needed to protect the public or natural resources. Rather than leaving trails closed indefinitely, the bill ensures that closures are applied to the smallest area possible and for the least amount of time practicable.

To address the fact that so many commonly-used trails are missing from the inventories done by agencies during travel management planning, the Public Lands Access Restoration Act also provides a mechanism for the public to nominate trails to be added to designated motorized roads and trail networks. These may include the designation of new motorized roads or trails, the conversion of administrative ones, or the inclusion of roads and trails not previously identified in agency inventories. The bill gives priority to proposals that improve connectivity within designated road or trail networks, protect natural resources, enhance access for land management activities like wildfire prevention and response, or provide better opportunities for motorized recreation.

Before I close, I want to take the opportunity to respond to some criticism we've heard that suggests this bill will legitimize illegal motorized use of trails. This is not true. The bill applies only to existing trails or roads managed by the Forest Service and the BLM that are designated for motorized use. It does *not* open user-created or illegal trails. It also doesn't allow for cross country motorized travel—while non-motorized users can go wherever they want, motorized users must stick to designated trails, and that doesn't change under this bill. Finally, this bill has no effect on policy for roads or trails within congressionally-designated wilderness areas, wildlife refuges or national parks.

By restoring the policy of “open unless posted closed,” the Public Lands Access Restoration Act will support multiple uses on public lands, foster better land management practices, and preserve access to public lands for future generations of Americans. When we ensure that Americans have access to public lands, we support local economies, prevent damage to forests and ecosystems through overuse, and promote the love and responsible use of our forests and rangelands.

This is ultimately what this bill and the TPA are all about. In our increasingly fast-paced, tech-driven, and divisive world, choosing to steward our natural resources well should be an issue that brings us together. Access to the outdoors is more than recreation—it's a proven benefit to our physical health, mental well-being, and overall quality of life, offering a much-needed opportunity to step away from screens and reconnect with the natural world. Public lands were set aside for public use, and we can and should ensure that these lands are protected without disregarding the freedom of the public to enjoy the lands that belong to them.

Thank you.