

## Testimony of Jim Akenson, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers

US House of Representatives

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Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Committee members. My name is Jim Akenson. I live in Joseph, Oregon, surrounded by the spectacular Wallowa Mountains within the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. I am representing Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, a non-profit conservation group that represents traditional outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen from nearly all 50 states. I serve as executive director of that organization.

America's national forests, refuges and Bureau of Land Management lands are treasures to the people of this nation. Over 100 years ago, President Theodore Roosevelt helped create this priceless American birthright. He knew this public domain of more than 200 million acres would become more and more valuable as America grew and developed. He was right.

In today's rapid-paced society we often forget that America's original wild country advocates were sportsmen: the likes of Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot and Aldo Leopold. These men cherished wildlife, wild places, and harvesting nature's bounty through hunting and fishing. They left behind, for us, a legacy and a mission to protect and wisely use our nation's precious natural resources.

Today, we face a very important question: **how do we balance the use of this public treasure in a way that guarantees clean water and wildlife habitat in a nation that is now home to 300 million people?**

Between new technology like motorized recreation and industrial uses like oil and gas development, our public lands are under more and more pressure. The USFS has nearly 375,000 miles of official roads (U.S. Forest Service 2006) in its

inventory and a minimum of 60,000 miles of unofficial, user created routes (U.S. Forest Service 2001), enough to circle the earth 17 times at the equator!

With most of my career spent as a wildlife biologist, I can tell you with certainty that protecting wild, natural places from industrial development and motorized recreation has very real benefits for our wildlife and water resources. Everyone benefits from natural backcountry, because the benefits of backcountry literally spill out of it in the form of clean rivers and abundant wildlife.

But today I would like to focus on another element: the human element.

I have a unique perspective on the topic of wilderness and our public lands, as I have been very privileged to live deep within the America's wilderness. I spent 21 years in Idaho's Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. My wife, Holly, and I managed an educational and research facility for the University of Idaho called Taylor Ranch Field Station.

Over two decades, we mentored hundreds of people who came to this remote wilderness laboratory to experience and learn about the natural world. They came from backgrounds ranging from city life in Chicago, Illinois, and Seattle, Washington, to rural ranch life right in Idaho. These were primarily young adults whose parents' political views varied from conservative Republican to liberal Democrat. Besides educating these young American's in natural resource issues and practices, we exposed them to the ways of "old Idaho" through putting up hay with a mule-team and traveling long distances by horse and mule or on foot with a backpack. They experienced much more than the beauty of wild places and wildlife. They experienced that same sense of self-reliance and accomplishment felt by Theodore Roosevelt when he was a young adventurous man experiencing the vanishing wild-west of Dakota Territory.

For Holly and me that rich lifestyle is mostly behind us now. We've moved back to town. But we constantly get comments from scores of past students that their most memorable college education experience was "learning the old ways of America" deep in the Idaho backcountry. A single visit to the wilderness can

shape a life forever. Places affording these types of experiences are becoming rare in this country.

The peace, solitude and physical challenge of the backcountry – including wilderness areas, roadless areas and well-managed working forests — are important for millions of American families. My group, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, was founded by fathers and mothers who know that the great outdoors will help shape the character of their children. They want to make sure their children and grandchildren will be free to enjoy the sounds and sights of nature, and enjoy clean, free-flowing rivers. Groups like ours are not working merely to protect the land and water for next hunting season or next fishing season. We are working for generations to come — or as TR put it “those still in the womb of time.”

The economic value of wild lands and waters in America is huge, with billions of dollars per year paid to commercial outfitters who take people on float trips on wild rivers of the West, Alaska, and the Great Lakes region, and who provide horse and mule pack trips in the mountains and canyon lands on our federally owned public lands. These high quality experiences are dependent on wild backcountry that is free from the noises of man’s machines and high-tech devices. As a resident of a “gateway” community, I assure you that the near proximity to Wallowa Lake and the Eagle Cap Wilderness Area help bring investment and jobs to my home town.

Let’s be perfectly clear: There are plenty of places to ride off-road vehicles on our national forests. These are powerful and popular tools. However, we must also have places — big, wild habitat — that is completely separate from the noise and disturbance that comes from motorized traffic. Likewise, there are places where oil and gas development, logging and mining are perfectly appropriate uses for national forests — but they must be balanced with the larger purpose behind our public lands.

Our public lands are owned by all Americans. Congress hires professionals to manage these resources. Let’s give them the leeway and the tools they need to

do their mission: serve the greatest good, for the greatest number, for the long run.

Consider this: When Theodore Roosevelt was president, there were about 100 million Americans. When I was born, there were roughly 200 million. Today, we are somewhere around 310 million. This will continue to grow.

Our public land legacy is a gift to each and every one of them, and those to come. We must manage it wisely. Once our backcountry is gone, there's no getting it back.

Thank you for considering my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully,

James Akenson

Executive Director, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers