

**Testimony of Michael Van Abel,
International Mountain Bicycling Association
Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural
Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Legislative Hearing on the Sawtooth National Recreation Area and Jerry
Peak Wilderness Additions Act H.R. 1138.**

Thank you Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Tsongas, and distinguished members of this Sub Committee. On behalf of The Wood River Bicycle Coalition, a local chapter of the International Mountain Bicycling Association and our industry members, I appreciate the opportunity to weigh in on this important bill affecting the management of our public lands. I respectfully offer these comments and our perspective on issues that are so critical to our nation's quality of life. We have concerns with H.R. 1138 – the Sawtooth National Recreation Area and Jerry Peak Wilderness Additions Act (SNRA+) because it will prohibit access by bicycle to at least twenty high quality backcountry trails.

Our local chapter, the Wood River Bicycle Coalition, works to conserve and maintain local trails, while also promoting responsible use by bicycle that creates and protects riding opportunities for all ages and abilities. Through public-private partnerships the Wood River Bicycle Coalition works to enhance bike-friendliness and access to our public lands. WRBC contributed 700 volunteer hours to restore wildfire damaged trails last spring; helped pass a levy to generate \$3 million to restore Ketchum area community bike path, which helped secure the recognition of a “Bicycle Friendly Community” by League of American Bicyclists.

The International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) leads a national and worldwide network of communities inclusive of its nearly 80,000 supporters organized into 190 local chapters, 340 affiliate clubs, and 600 local independent bicycle dealers. IMBA wrote the book on sustainable trail building techniques and has become a leader in trail design, construction, and maintenance. The organization also encourages responsible riding, volunteer trail work, and cooperation among trail user groups and land managers. Each year, local volunteers conduct more than 750,000 hours of trail stewardship on America's public lands and are recognized by federal, state, and local land managers as among the most committed volunteer trail stewards.

We applaud Congressman Simpson for his longtime commitment to protect the Boulder-White Clouds landscape. However, we believe H.R. 1138 unnecessarily alienates a growing constituency committed to landscape conservation for healthy sustainable outdoor recreation. We support the enhanced protection and recognition of both the Boulder-White Clouds and Jerry Peak area. However, we do not believe the approach taken in this bill meets the full character of this landscape. This landscape does possess incredible wilderness characteristics, but it is also home to some of the most exceptional mountain bicycling experiences found anywhere in the world, which is an exceedingly rare combination. We would support any protective measure that embraces the existing recreational experiences, including mountain bicycling, and the wild character of the Boulder-White Clouds and Jerry Peak area.

The Wood River Valley Has a Broad Spectrum of Recreational Experiences

From the luxury resort accommodations of Sun Valley to the nearby primitive Sawtooth Wilderness and Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, the Wood River Valley has an outdoors experience for everyone. The Boulder-White Clouds and Jerry Peak areas play a very

critical role between these two ends of the spectrum. These areas are open to diverse yet sustainable backcountry biking trails and other recreational uses. Opportunities for the full range of recreation contributes to this area's draw and attracts recreationalists of all kinds and abilities, which is critical to a tourism based economy like the Wood River Valley.

A Healthy Recreation Economy Requires A Full Spectrum of Experiences

The national outdoor recreation economy generates \$646 billion in consumer spending. 81% or \$525 billion is generated from travel related expenditures.¹ Outdoor recreation in Idaho produces \$6.3 billion in consumer spending, directly supports 77 thousand jobs, and generates \$461 million in state and local tax revenue.² More locally, bicycling contributed \$33 million to the Wood River Valley's economy in a single season.³ User surveys indicate over 700,000 user days on the trails.⁴ For reference, the Sun Valley Ski Resort's annual skier days are generally about half that amount. The trails that are subject to closure in this bill may not be the most frequently used trails in the valley, but they are the marquee trails that inspire visitors, stoke the fires of the adventurous, and attract visitors and tourism. Loss of access to these superlative backcountry experiences, which beckon mountain bikers, creates the specter of public lands closed to healthy, active outdoor recreation among a well-educated, high-household income demographic that love to travel.

Bicycles are Engaging Youth

The space between Wilderness and Multiple Use Management, which includes bicycle access, is more important today than it has ever been. Americans often live and work in highly developed urban settings and have little to no wild lands experiences, yet we are familiar with the transformative effect of ventures into these pristine landscapes. The trends away from these experiences, and all active recreation, are something for which we should be concerned as a society who is typically more sedentary and disconnected from nature. Bicycle participation is, however a bright spot in bucking the trend of inactivity and especially so among youth. According to the Outdoor Industry Association, bicycling is the number one outdoor activity among youth from ages 6 to 17, and is ranked third for young adults 18 to 24.⁵ The meteoric growth of the high school age, National Interscholastic Cycling Association including the newly formed Idaho League, set to have its inaugural race season this fall, demonstrates the appetite among young people to engage in active recreation, which will likely become a lifetime of health promoting activity. Backcountry mountain biking opportunities like Ants Basin and Castle Divide provide experiences that develop character traits like physical and mental strength, determination, confidence, and appreciation for the natural world. The imperative of good public policy as seen in Congressman Simpson's dedication to protecting this place is, and should be about the next generation of public land stewards, many of whom embrace bicycling in the backcountry, which contributes to and promotes health among a society of otherwise inactive, unhealthy Americans.

¹ Outdoor Industry Association – Outdoor Recreation Economy Report 2012

² Id.

³ Economic Report from Sun Valley Economic Development, 2012

⁴ Trail Count Study from Blaine County Recreation Department, 2012

⁵ 2014 Outdoor Industry Foundation Participation Report

(<http://www.outdoorfoundation.org/pdf/ResearchParticipation2014.pdf>)

Not All Trails Are Equal

Congressman Simpson has indicated that accommodations have been made for bicycles. However, those accommodations were incidental to those made for motorized uses. From our earliest engagement, over ten years ago, IMBA and local mountain bicyclists have asked for continued access to the Castle Divide and Ants Basin trails because these experiences are invaluable and irreplaceable. Of the approximately 20 trails for which access will be closed by passage of the SNRA+, these two trails are far and away the most important. They offer marquee experiences for mountain bikers, allowing them to connect to the core of this wild place. Both are challenging endeavors, where use is limited by their strenuous nature, the short times for which they are snow-free, and the logistical hurdles one must clear to ride them. It is undeniable that these trails and the journey they take one on are unique. Not a single person who has hiked or ridden a horse or bicycle on them has come away unchanged. The trails frequently cited by Congressman Simpson as providing mountain biking opportunities are simply not the same. No amount of mileage can replace the experience, value, and perspective they provide. These trails mean a great deal to local communities and the local recreation economy, and they inspire and attract locals and visitors alike.

Policy Not Politics

In order to craft sound public policy solutions there must be true compromise. The SNRA+ bill before the Sub Committee reflects a series of compromises for other user groups, most notably the subtraction of 30 square miles for potential helicopter skiing access and additional cut-outs for motorized routes. These accommodations significantly reduced Wilderness acreage and yet created limited incidental benefits for mountain bikers as they were intended solely to benefit motorized recreation. Today's bill has made no purposeful provisions for mountain biking access desired by local citizens and businesses. With the growth in mountain biking and the loss of other trails elsewhere, it is more important than ever to retain access to these trails. What mountain bike enthusiasts seek would not further reduce Wilderness acreage; rather it would establish a provision to allow for continued access to established uses on two isolated trails.

Congressman Simpson has also stated that IMBA is attempting to turn his bill into a national referendum on allowing bicycles in designated Wilderness. This is not our motivation to weigh in on HR 1138. IMBA is not seeking to alter Wilderness management as a whole, by altering either the administrative regulations or the language of the Wilderness Act. It is true there are some in the mountain bicycling community who would like IMBA to pursue such a change, but just as many mountain bike enthusiasts support the prohibition of bicycles in Congressionally designated Wilderness. What we are seeking is to preserve access to two of the best backcountry trails in Idaho via a simple solution that is not without precedent.

Conclusion

We ask you to consider changes to the SNRA+ bill that will allow continued mountain bike access to Castle Divide and Ants Basin, by way of non-Wilderness "human powered" recreation cherry-stems or by way of a language-based exemption for continued mountain bike use on these trails. The following language could be inserted into the existing structure of this bill.

SEC. 102. ADMINISTRATION.

- (i) Established bicycle use shall be permitted to continue on Forest Service trails 704 - Livingston Mill (Castle Divide) and 721 - Ants Basin.

There is strong precedent for similar special provisions in the Frank Church-River of No Return and other Idaho Wilderness areas.

Sec. 7(a)(1)

(a) Within the River of No Return Wilderness and the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness additions designated by this Act— (1) the landing of aircraft, where this use has become established prior to the date of enactment of this Act shall be permitted to continue ...

Sec. 7(a)(2)

the grazing of livestock where established prior to the date of enactment of this Act, shall be permitted to continue...⁶

Idaho has a proud tradition of creative and collaborative solutions to complex public land questions in order for the SNRA+ to carry this tradition forward it must include similarly creative, collaborative solutions. We thank Congressman Simpson again for his dedication to this place yet we encourage the Committee to consider modern solutions that reflect comprehensive compromise and purposeful accommodations in order to protect all the Boulder-White Clouds have to offer.

⁶ Central Idaho Wilderness Act 96 P.L. 31