

November 17, 2020

The Honorable Mike Lee
Chairman
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests & Mining
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
304 Dirksen Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Ron Wyden
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests & Mining
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
304 Dirksen Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

RE: S. 1695, Opposition to “Human-Powered Travel in Wilderness Areas Act”

Chairman Lee, Ranking Member Ron Wyden and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of our members and supporters, which number in the tens of thousands, we thank the subcommittee for the opportunity to comment on S. 1695, the “Human-Powered Travel in Wilderness Areas Act.” **We strongly oppose S. 1695** and encourage subcommittee members to oppose this legislation as well.

S. 1695 seeks to open federal wilderness areas to mountain biking, a clear violation of the 1964 Wilderness Act, the nation’s seminal conservation law. Most importantly, S. 1695 would threaten the character of the entire National Wilderness Preservation System by undermining our nation’s bedrock landscape conservation tool.

The Wilderness Act is simple and clear in that wilderness areas are established:

“...in order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and **growing mechanization**, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition...” [emphasis added].

S. 1695 would amend the section of the Wilderness Act (Section 4(c)) that prohibits the use of motorized and mechanized devices, undermining one of the main reasons the Wilderness Act was passed into law in the first place. That section states in part:

“...there shall be no temporary road, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, **no other form of mechanical transport...**” [emphasis added].

The Wilderness Act clearly established that the “enduring resource” of wilderness is to be the last refuge from the influence of mechanization. We believe the intent of the Act is more relevant today than ever before.

Our nations wilderness areas include only 5% of our nation’s public lands. In the lower 48 states, it’s merely 3%. The remaining **97%** is open to motorized and mechanized recreation. Designated wilderness areas have a fundamentally different purpose than providing for motorized and mechanized access. In fact, that is the very purpose of the Wilderness Act – to provide for a few remote, pristine areas where nature prevails.

This is the land we count on to provide our cities with clean air and water. It’s where wildlife finds its only true refuge. As development and increasing population continue to press in from all sides, we must make sure we are balancing our recreational desires with the conservation values of wilderness landscapes themselves. In other words, wilderness for wilderness’ sake.

There remains a nearly inexhaustible supply of non-wilderness federal lands that are open to mountain biking and where additional mountain bike trails and opportunities continue to be created. In the last decade, new mountain biking trails have been developed at a historically rapid rate.

Proponents of S. 1695 argue that bikes are human powered and should be allowed to go everywhere a hiker can go. That is no reason to amend the Wilderness Act. A closer look at the capability of these machines says otherwise. Today’s mountain bikes, with their disc brakes, shock absorbers and climbing-gear-oriented drive trains are technical machines designed to take their riders further and faster than ever before. Where a backpacker or horseback rider might take an entire day to climb 10 miles into the wilderness, a mountain biker can do it in two hours.

Simply put, S. 1695 would open a Pandora’s box to other forms of mechanized travel by future Congresses. It would forever change the primitive, backcountry experience enjoyed by millions of Americans each year. For example, new battery technologies, which make it hard to tell electric bikes from traditional bikes, are muddying the waters in the debate over where these machines are appropriate. Law enforcement on public lands has already been cut to the bone, making it harder to manage ever-increasing numbers of outdoor recreationists. Agencies are ill-equipped to handle this new management issue.

In several locations across the country, wilderness advocates, recreation organizations and mountain bike groups have successfully worked together to develop legislative proposals that preserve access to important mountain bike trails while protecting adjacent areas as wilderness. These collaborations are widely celebrated and serve as models for building successful partnerships between stakeholders and land managers. Divisive legislation like S. 1695 significantly undermines the ability of stakeholder groups to work together.

Opening our nation's treasured wilderness areas to mechanized uses, most notably bicycles, would irrefutably and irrevocably redefine wilderness – and the very intent of the Wilderness Act. This would profoundly and forever change the experiences provided on many of our nation's national scenic and national historic trails, and not for the better. User conflicts will arise. High-speed bikes and slow-moving horse and hikers will clash with greater frequency, and the casualty will be everyone's safety. It's already happened.

It's important to note that we are not against mountain biking. In fact, many of our members and supporters are avid mountain bikers who see the value and importance of maintaining wilderness trails as simple footpaths. We believe mountain biking must be accommodated on our public lands, but designated wilderness areas are not the place for bikes.

Congress wisely has resisted efforts to undermine the Wilderness Act for more than five decades. These efforts have failed because of strong public support for wilderness. This latest effort deserves to fail as well. We strongly urge members of the subcommittee to reject this proposal.

Thank you for your continued support of our nation's wilderness. If we can provide further clarification of our comments herein, please contact either Randy Rasmussen, Back Country Horsemen of America, WildernessAdvisor@bcha.org, or Mark Larabee, Pacific Crest Trail Association, mlarabee@pcta.org

Respectfully submitted on behalf of,

Ala Kahakai Trail Association

American Hiking Society

American Trails

Appalachian Trail Conservancy

Arizona Trail Association

Back Country Horsemen of America

Continental Divide Trail Coalition

Florida Trail Association

Ice Age Trail Alliance, Inc.

Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation

Lewis and Clark Trust, Inc.

National Washington Rochambeau Revolutionary Route Association

National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance

North Country Trail Association

Oregon-California Trails Association

Overmountain Victory Trail Association

Pacific Crest Trail Association

Pacific Northwest Trail Association

Partnership for the National Trails System