

## **Testimony of Rep. Greg Walden**

House Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Public Lands  
and Environmental Regulations

10:00am – June 10, 2014  
1324 Longworth House Office Building

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Thank you, Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva and members of the committee, for the opportunity to testify today in support of H.R. 4272, the Forest Access in Rural Communities Act.

I look forward to working with the committee to mark up this bill and move it promptly to the floor for final consideration.

Over half of Oregon's land, 53% to be exact, is controlled by the federal government, and in many counties this number can be much higher. Just as the National Forests have historically played a significant role in providing timber jobs that were the pillars of rural economies, access to these forests is a cultural and social mainstay as well.

Local residents accessing these forests are camping, hunting, fishing, cutting firewood or collecting berries in the same places their families have visited for several generations, and often depend on these public lands for their livelihood. These activities are a way of life in rural Oregon; yet with the onslaught of national monuments, roadless areas, wilderness, and the Forest Services' travel management rule, it seems access constantly is being restricted. And far too often restrictions are put in place while overlooking the uses and needs of the local community.

In Eastern Oregon, the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest's travel management plan is one of the best examples of how these processes have pushed forward while ignoring local communities along the way.

From the beginning, local counties and volunteers dedicated countless hours of personal time traveling, documenting roads, and communicating their needs to agency officials. At the end of the process, they developed comments and put forth suggestions on roads that weren't being used and could be closed, but also pointed out roads that are popular, necessary, and needed to remain open.

In 2012, when agency official rolled out the final plan, over 4,000 miles of road were slated for closure, on a forest where a quarter of the land, 600,000 acres, is already designated wilderness. In Wallowa County alone, well over 70% of the National Forest is already shut off to motorized recreation. In what amounted to an assault on good process and rural traditions on public lands, it was clear to those who participated in the process that the Forest Service had largely, if not entirely, ignored their thoughtful and deliberate input.

Having faced years of declining timber harvest and the resulting unemployment and poverty at the hand of the federal government and agency bureaucrats, the local communities didn't take

this lying down. They pulled together and organized. At one point close to 1,000 people attended a meeting to learn how to effectively appeal the plan.

The Forest Service has since pulled their plan back, but will approach this again. Hopefully they have learned from the past, but issues with travel management planning on other forests in Oregon and across the country suggest otherwise.

Since the plan was pulled backed, I have worked with county commissioners and the local residents who enjoy driving, riding, camping, cutting firewood and picking berries on their National Forest to craft this legislation to ensure local communities have a say in forest access decisions.

Mr. Chairman, I ask that the letters of support for this legislation from five counties and seven forest user groups be entered into the record. I appreciate their support and their time, effort and feedback in helping craft legislation that meets the local communities' needs.

This legislation simply puts a stop to the flawed travel management planning rule that applied a one-size fits all approach for road management on every community. For future proposals that result in a road closure or access restriction, it requires the Forest Service to consult during the planning process, and seek concurrence from the counties within which the road closure occurs, and the neighboring counties, before the project can be implemented.

Doing so levels the playing field and ensures that the local residents and communities, those most affected by these management decisions, have a strong say and aren't ignored in the process.

President Theodore Roosevelt said "We shall succeed, not by preventing the use, but by making the forests of use to the settler, the rancher, the miner, the man who lives in the neighborhood..." It seems we have lost our way from that multiple use vision for the great forest reserves and some have lost sight of the important role of local communities in this process. H.R. 4272 provides an opportunity to move back to that idea by putting our local communities back in the driver's seat when it comes to accessing and managing our public forests.