

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS, FORESTS, AND MINING, CONCERNING S. 1686, A BILL TO AMEND THE WILDERESS ACT TO ALLOW LOCAL FEDERAL OFFICIALS TO DETERMINE THE MANNER IN WHICH NONMOTORIZED USES MAY BE PERMITTED IN WILDERNESS AREAS, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

JUNE 16, 2021

Chairman Cortez Masto, Ranking Member Lee, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the Department of the Interior's views on S. 1686. The bill would amend the Wilderness Act to allow local Federal officials to determine the manner in which nonmotorized uses, including mechanical human-powered travel, may be permitted in wilderness areas.

The Department strongly opposes S. 1686. Allowing mechanical travel in designated wilderness areas would undermine the principles of the Wilderness Act, which was intended to preserve certain lands in their natural condition, protect watersheds and wildlife, and provide opportunities for outdoor recreation and scientific research. Only a small portion of the public land in the United States is designated as wilderness, with the purpose of preserving land from uses that could damage the natural condition, yet there are many opportunities across Department of the Interior managed lands to use mechanically assisted travel.

The use of mechanical travel equipment, such as bicycles, in wilderness conflicts with the stated policy of Congress in Section 2 of the Wilderness Act that sought to assure that "growing mechanization ... does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States." The mountain bike is an example of the growing mechanization that Congress could have envisioned when it enacted the Wilderness Act. In 1964, bicycles were popular but not yet designed or constructed for use on trails. Over time, bicycles have been transformed using lightweight construction materials, improved gearing and suspension, and other design and performance improvements that have made them highly functional on steep trails and challenging terrain. Similarly, game carts have evolved into lightweight, foldable, packable, single track devices capable of transport miles into the backcountry. These are but two of the human-powered devices the bill would allow into wilderness. The addition of nonmotorized, mechanical travel would exacerbate the strain on these protected lands and degrade their wilderness character over time.

Congress wisely passed the Wilderness Act to preserve some of the nation's natural treasures without impacts from motor and mechanized vehicles and equipment, as well as roads and structures. Allowing these broadened categories of human-powered travel equipment into wilderness would violate the intention of Congress when it passed the Wilderness Act and disrupt the serenity so many Americans seek when they visit these lands.

S. 1686 would also require local federal land managers to make a determination of all permissible forms of nonmotorized travel on certain routes within wilderness under the

management of the local official. If a local official does not make a determination, within two years of enactment of the bill, any form of nonmotorized travel under the management of the local official would automatically be authorized. This section would erode the purpose of the Wilderness Act, and invite inconsistent management of the wilderness system. Moreover, automatic authorization of all types of nonmotorized travel would exclude public input on such actions.

The President's America the Beautiful Initiative seeks to improve access to recreational opportunities while conserving 30% of America's lands and waters by 2030. Improved recreational access to public lands and waters – in an equitable, well-managed and sustainable manner – can broaden and deepen connections to nature and its benefits, and encourage the next generation of outdoor stewards. We would be happy to work with the bill sponsor and committee to find avenues for expanding and improving recreational opportunities that would not result in undermining the protections of the Wilderness Act.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this statement on S. 1686.