

**Testimony for the Record of
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**Before the
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
United States House of Representatives**

**Regarding
the MAPLand Act and SOAR Act**

June 8, 2021

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Westerman, and members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to testify before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands and I appreciate you having me.

My name is Joel Pedersen, and I am the President and CEO of the Mule Deer Foundation (MDF). I am pleased to be here to testify in support of the Modernizing Access to our Public Land (MAPLand) Act and the Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation (SOAR) Act; two pieces of legislation that enjoy far reaching bipartisan and bicameral support.

The MDF is the only conservation organization in North America dedicated to restoring, improving, and protecting mule deer, black-tailed deer, and their habitat. Since 1988, MDF has been dedicated to restoring, improving and protecting deer habitat as a means of establishing self-sustaining, healthy, free ranging and huntable deer populations. MDF is a strong voice for hunter access, wildlife management, and conservation policy. The Foundation is also committed to the recruitment and retention of the next generation of hunter-conservationists. We encourage and support collaborative and responsible wildlife management with government agencies, private organizations, and landowners and encourage responsible and ethical behavior and awareness of issues among those whose actions affect deer.

Prior to joining MDF, I worked in a number of capacities at the National Wild Turkey Federation. For more than two decades, I served in leadership positions including directing western conservation programs and ultimately overseeing all federal and state policy for the organization. While at the Federation, I was also honored to serve as the Chairman of the American Wildlife Conservation Partners. I earned a bachelor's degree in Wildlife Biology from the University of Nebraska-Kearney, and a master's degree in Wildlife Science from the University of Tennessee. I am a Nebraska native, have two daughters, and am an avid outdoorsman.

Recently reintroduced on a bipartisan basis in both the House and Senate, the MAPLand Act would require public land management agencies to digitize records of easements and rights-of-way across private lands, making it possible for the public to identify places to hunt, fish and participate in other forms of outdoor recreation. The SOAR Act would improve the permitting process for commercial outfitters and guides, educational and nonprofit organizations, and community groups wishing to access public lands. MDF believes that both bills will deliver robust recreational access for hunters and other outdoor recreation enthusiasts who currently face a multitude of barriers to access which are often cited as the reason for a lack of participation in outdoor recreation.

MAPLand Act

Currently, federal land management agencies including the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Park Service, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lack the resources and capacity needed to undertake digitization of documents related to the lands they administer. Across the West, more than 9.52 million acres of federal public lands have no permanent legal means of access and, in many places, historical access to public lands across

private property continues to decline. Most access easement records are still held on paper files at local offices and have yet to be integrated into digital mapping systems. For example, the U.S. Forest Service alone has an estimated 37,000 recorded easements, approximately 5,000 of which have been digitized and uploaded into an electronic database.

Digital mapping and GPS technologies have revolutionized the ways in which sportsmen and women navigate public lands; however incomplete and inconsistent mapping data prevents outdoor enthusiasts from realizing the full benefit of these technologies. In this day and age virtually everyone owns a phone equipped with mapping technology and more and more of them are utilizing those devices to identify public access opportunities for outdoor recreation. The Modernizing Access to Our Public Land (MAPLand) Act, (H.R. 3113), will help meet this growing demand by providing the resources needed to standardize and complete the digitization of information regarding recreational access and allowable activities on millions of acres of federal public lands throughout the United States.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the American people are rediscovering our public lands, many of which are currently experiencing overcrowding and overuse. Enhancing and expanding the digital information available regarding access opportunities will help to better distribute use across landscapes and, in turn, reduce user conflicts while improving recreational experiences on federal lands.

In addition, digitizing access easements and rights of way will ensure that these important public records are not only accessible but protected from threats of potential loss which could result from the destruction of nondigitized documents.

Digitizing this information will also be a resource that will assist the BLM and Forest Service in fulfilling their multiple use mandates while also allowing the Corps and the Fish and Wildlife Service to better manage their lands.

The bill also requires land management agencies to provide information about seasonal allowances and restrictions for vehicle use on public roads and trails as well as boundaries of areas where hunting or recreational shooting is regulated or closed. Doing so will provide the public better clarity and certainty regarding allowable outdoor recreation activities.

MAPLand would authorize \$31 million over three years to achieve the aforementioned objectives. This relatively minimal investment will allow taxpayers to identify opportunities to access the lands that they own and, as a result yield exponential returns on this investment for state and local economies throughout the country.

MAPLand enjoys far reaching bipartisan and bicameral support in Congress. MDF would like to thank Congressman Blake Moore for introducing the bill along with Representatives Neguse, Schrier, and Fulcher. In addition, MAPLand has also been introduced by Senator Risch in the Senate along with a diverse cross-section of bipartisan original cosponsors including the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee Senators Manchin and Barrasso along with Senators King, Daines, Heinrich, Crapo, Collins, and Kelly.

Finally, MAPLand is strongly supported by a broad spectrum of sporting organizations including the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, who has provided tremendous leadership on this legislation, along with the National Shooting Sports Foundation, Boone and Crockett Club, Delta Waterfowl, National Wild Turkey Federation, Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Wild Sheep Foundation, Safari Club International, the National Wildlife Federation, and many others.

I would welcome an opportunity to discuss the merits of this legislation with any member of the Subcommittee who is considering becoming a cosponsor of this very important bill.

SOAR Act

Guides and outfitters are a part of the life-blood of the Mule Deer Foundation. Many of our members and supporters make their living in the guiding and outfitting business while many others utilize guides and outfitters to enhance their deer hunting experiences. A significant percentage of these guides and outfitters hunt on federal public lands and their ability to efficiently and effectively apply for and receive permits to do so is critical to their success and, as a byproduct, critical to the success of the Mule Deer Foundation. To that end, MDF is pleased to support the SOAR Act, (H.R. 3670), which improves the permitting authority of federal land management agencies to simplify and enhance recreational access on our public lands.

In general, federal land management agencies require guides and outfitters to apply for and obtain special recreation permits to take trips on public lands. While there is a lack of uniformity across land management agencies regarding what the permits are called, all require them as a precondition to guides leading trips on federal lands. This requirement applies to all outfitters and guides, non-profit organizations, volunteer-based clubs, college and university recreation programs.

Despite being essential to outdoor programming, outfitters and guides often report that when they contact land management agencies, they are told that no permits are available. In many cases, the agencies deny permit applications because they do not have the administrative capacity to process the application and administer the permit. Typically, these rejections are unrelated to the carrying capacity of an ecosystem or adverse environmental impacts. Instead, outfitters and guides are often denied permits because the permitting system has become too complicated and labor intensive for the agencies to administer.

Specifically, the SOAR Act will reauthorize the permitting authority of the BLM and Forest Service while also bringing the US Fish and Wildlife Service and Bureau of Reclamation under the authority of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act thereby allowing those agencies to retain and reinvest permit fees.

Importantly, the bill also allows multiple agencies to issue a single permit when a trip will traverse lands under multiple federal jurisdictions. This will prove to be a significant improvement that will reduce complexity and time-consuming paperwork.

The SOAR Act also authorizes a flat, per person fee to simplify permit cost calculations. It also disentangles the special recreation permitting process by directing the agencies to consider using programmatic reviews and developing additional categorical exclusions in the National Environmental Policy Act review process. Moreover, the bill will make permit applications available online similar to how camping permits are available online at Recreation.gov. This commonsense modernization will not only be more user friendly but it will also reduce instances when agencies lack the resources to meet permit application demand which, in some cases results in an inability to process permit applications.

The SOAR Act provides a number of ‘good government’ solutions to simplify, enhance, and modernize the federal lands recreational permitting system. The legislation is critical for reestablishing and maintaining access for America’s sportsmen and women as well as benefitting guides and outfitters and local and regional outdoor recreation-based economies.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. The Mule Deer Foundation greatly appreciates the Subcommittee’s work on these important bills and we look forward to continuing to work with you to shepherd them through to enactment.