



HR 1349

Testimony of Liz Bergeron, Executive Director and CEO, Pacific Crest Trail Association

**Presented to the Federal Lands Subcommittee of the House Natural Resources Committee
December 4, 2017**

Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Hanabusa and members of the subcommittee:

On behalf of the Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA) and our 12,300 members, we would like to thank you for the opportunity to comment on H.R. 1349. **The PCTA strongly opposes H.R. 1349 and we encourage members of the subcommittee to oppose it.**

H.R. 1349 is a serious threat to the nation's wilderness preservation system. The 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) runs from Canada to Mexico through Washington, Oregon and California. One of only 11 National Scenic Trails, the PCT is designated for hikers and horseback riders and crosses 48 Congressionally designated wilderness areas. About half the trail is in wilderness. By opening our nation's treasured wilderness areas to mechanized uses, most notably bicycles, this bill would effectively redefine what wilderness is—and forever change the iconic experience provided on the Pacific Crest Trail.

Please consider that experience: riding a horse or taking a 10-mile walk into a high-country alpine lake with a pack on your back could take a good part of the day. Horses and people walk at about the same speed. Ten miles can feel like 100 to a foot traveler. But a person on a bike, assisted by high-tech shock absorbers, disc brakes, light-weight carbon-fiber frames and state-of-the-art gearing, can cover the same ground in an hour.

It is a fact that bikes allow their riders to go further and faster into these fragile places, and thus amplify human impact on wilderness.

Think about the family on horseback climbing along a high-country trail with a sheer cliff on one side of the trail. As a bike speeds silently around the corner, a horse reels, there's a crash, people and animals are injured. It's already happened and will happen more if wilderness trails are opened to people on wheels.

Some cycling advocates say this is an access issue. They complain that they are being excluded from public land. But the Wilderness Act does not exclude them, just their bikes. It's noteworthy that less than 3 percent of public land in the lower 48 states is protected as wilderness; the rest is open to motorized and mechanized recreation. The U.S. Forest Service says that 98 percent of non-wilderness trails on its vast properties are open to bicycles. That makes the protection of wilderness trails such as the PCT even more important.

Bicyclists will tell you that it's hard work to maintain wilderness trails without mechanized tools such as chainsaws and brush cutters. They're right. But PCTA crews are expert in the use of historic



hand tools, like crosscut saws, and they love it. These tools are more difficult to use and it takes longer to get the job done. But it's worth it.

Chainsaws, wheeled carts, snowmobiles, helicopters and bicycles are excluded from wilderness for good reason. Wilderness provides our cities with clean air and water. It gives us places to seek refuge from those cities, to find peace and solitude. It is where we walk and camp, hunt and fish, go birdwatching. But it's not just about us. Wilderness is also about wildlife. Protecting wilderness must mean putting wilderness first.

We must put ourselves aside for just a moment and realize that we are stewards of this land and the plants and animals that live there. It is our responsibility to protect these landscapes. In doing so, we protect the best of ourselves and send an enduring message to future generations that this ethic is important. Change that, and we give up the high ground. We open Pandora's box for the next special interest group to weaken the law that protects a small portion of the most sensitive public land from us and our machines.

The truth is that many wilderness areas are already changing. Public land managers have for years limited entry by requiring permits because of visitor use impacts. These landscapes are sensitive. Human impacts, such as water pollution, improperly disposed human waste and simple numbers are having an impact. Opening wilderness to thousands of fast-moving people on bikes will feel like a tsunami. Wilderness areas just can't handle the numbers this bill will throw at them.

Mountain biking in wilderness violates both the letter and the intent of the 1964 Wilderness Act. The framers of this landmark protection were members of a bi-partisan Congress intent on leaving behind pristine places for future generations. In a move meant to counter the constant creep and degradation of human development on pristine public landscapes, they set aside these wild places. They knew that unforeseen types of mechanized uses eventually would impinge upon the wilderness values they were trying to protect. Hence, the Wilderness Act states:

*"...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 is a rule we've made for ourselves and it should not be broken. It balances our recreational desires with our conservation values. The Wilderness Act is simple and clear: 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]

H.R. 1349 simply tosses this aside.

To be clear, the PCTA is not against mountain biking. Many of our members are mountain bikers, and they enjoy this pursuit separately. It's no fun for hikers and horseback riders to be startled by a

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bike coming at them at high speeds. It's no fun for a mountain biker to have to slam on the brakes because people are walking on the trail in front of them as they fly down their favorite hill.

At PCTA, we truly believe that mountain biking and other recreational pursuits must continue to be accommodated on the public lands. We are committed to working with cycling groups on finding ways to ensure that cyclists have exceptional places to recreate. However, we feel that it's imperative, in this age in which people are inundated with advancing technology, that the Pacific Crest Trail and the wilderness that makes it unique are protected for future generations.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this testimony and for your continued support for the Pacific Crest Trail, the National Trails System and quality recreation opportunities.