



Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association, Inc.

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wisconsinwoodlands.org



Wisconsin Senate Committee on Financial Institutions and Sporting Heritage Public Hearing on February 14, 2024

WVOA in Opposition to SB 999 relating to Vehicle Access to Roads and Trails on Lands Designated as Open under the Managed Forest Law (MFL) program

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Committee members,

I am Don Hoffman, the president of the Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association (WVOA), and with me is our executive director, Nancy Bozek. WVOA represents more than 1600 members with over 260,000 forested acres across the state with a mission of sustainably managing our woodlands. The majority of our members have professional management plans and most of those plans include enrollment in the Managed Forest Law program (MFL).

In the limited time I had to query our Board of Directors and regional Chapter Chairs, there was universal agreement that this bill will have serious negative impacts on our ability to sustainably care for our private woodlands.

Since the MFL program was enacted in 1985, lands designated as open under the program have allowed for five public activities - hunting, fishing, hiking, sight-seeing, and cross-country skiing. These are reasonable activities that tread lightly on fragile landscapes. Allowing motorized vehicles up to 8,000 pounds is NOT reasonable. It includes full-size pickup trucks that could be driven on trails never built for that purpose. This traffic will compact fragile soils, bring in invasive species, and create erodible ruts on slopes. Impromptu traffic off trail to turn around, avoid an obstacle or extract a vehicle will further damage delicate regeneration and wildlife habitat. Private trails are not built or marked for trail riding and may contain hazards not known to the public or even the landowner. This brings up a serious question of liability.

We also view this bill as burdensome to administer and enforce. The bill acknowledges that there will be damage to private roads and trails by creating a DOT grant program funded by conservation fund dollars. However, this grant does not cover additional damages such as bringing in invasive species and the possibility of wildfires or illegal dumping. This puts the burden on the landowner to mark the trails and hazards, and places them in the difficult role of enforcer if trail riders don't understand or respect the limits of this legislation. When damage occurs, landowners must apply for grants and wait for approval and repair by even larger vehicles.

If this bill becomes law, our prediction is that you will see a substantial reduction in lands designated as Open under the MFL program, which will actually decrease opportunities for allowed activities. The additional burdens and damage will also discourage new enrollments in the MFL program which will decrease sustainably managed acres in Wisconsin and the economic benefits and jobs it provides to our citizens. As a minimum, if passed, existing MFL contracts with open lands should be grandfathered as is or allowed to exit the program without penalty.

Respectfully,

Don Hoffman, President

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