

Testimony of

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Subcommittee on Wildlife, Water, and Fisheries
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Regarding

H.R. 6127, the Modernizing Access to Our Public Waters (MAPWaters) Act

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Good morning, Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Taylor Schmitz, and I serve as the Director of Federal Relations for the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF). First, I would like to thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee for holding a hearing on H.R. 6127, the Modernizing Access to Our Public Waters (MAPWaters) Act. This bipartisan legislation is a common-sense effort to bring public water mapping information into the 21st century and is strongly supported by CSF. The Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation would also like to thank the Subcommittee as well as the full Committee for continuing to prioritize access to our public lands and waters.

While my testimony will primarily focus on the benefits of the MAPWaters Act for America's nearly 55 million sportsmen and women, it is important to note that this legislation impacts all individuals who enjoy federal public waters managed by the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA). While states have a significant role in supporting anglers, these two Departments also provide substantial opportunities for sportsmen and women. For example, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service alone supports more than 7.1 million annual fishing visits. The agencies under the umbrella of these two Departments belong to the citizens of this country, and there is an expectation that reasonable access to recreate and enjoy the lands and waters under their jurisdiction is a condition that is afforded through public ownership.

Established in 1989, CSF is a non-partisan organization that works with the bipartisan Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus (CSC), the largest, most active caucus on Capitol Hill, and with state legislators and governors across the country. The current House CSC Co-Chairs are Representatives Bruce Westerman (AR) and Jimmy Panetta (CA), and Vice Chairs are Representatives Garret Graves (LA) and Jared Golden (ME). For the past seven years, I have served as a liaison from CSF to the CSC to provide non-partisan information to help guide policies of importance to sportsmen and women. In addition, I currently serve as the Vice Chair of the American Wildlife Conservation Partners (AWCP), and in January, I will assume the role of AWCP Chairman. AWCP is a consortium of 50 organizations that represent the interests of America's millions of hunter-conservationists, professional wildlife and natural resource managers, outdoor recreation users, conservation educators, and wildlife scientists.

At the outset, it is important to provide an overview of the significance of hunting, fishing, and other forms of outdoor recreation for the United States economy. Sportsmen and women alone spend roughly \$100 billion annually on gear, boat fuel, travel, licenses, and other trip-related expenditures, and support more than 1.6 million jobs with salaries and wages approaching \$72 billion. Furthermore, according to the Outdoor Industry Association, outdoor recreation contributes \$887 billion annually in consumer spending. To put that in perspective, the same report notes the outdoor recreation community contributes nearly double that of the pharmaceutical industry (\$468 billion) in annual consumer spending.

In order to maintain these robust contributions to the U.S. economy, there needs to be places for sportsmen and women and other outdoor enthusiasts to recreate. Unfortunately, lack of access is often cited as the number one reason sportsmen and women no longer participate in our time-honored traditions of hunting and fishing. "Access" is often a difficult term to define because

“access” means different things to different people, depending on how you hunt, fish, or utilize public lands and waters. What is certain is that “access” also includes the ability to have certainty on when, where, and how you can enjoy an outdoor pursuit. To that end, “access” may be best defined as “you know it when you see it”. For example, to some, access may mean you are clearly able to drive your vehicle through a Forest Service road or launch a bass boat directly at a public boat ramp. To others, access may mean parking at the Forest Service gate and having the ability to hike five miles back to your favorite hunting or fishing location. What is not left up to the discretion of each individual is that entry itself to open units of land or water is not all there is to “access” in many cases, but also includes the ability to easily understand the rules and regulations, including open areas, boat speed and horsepower restrictions, gear limitations, etc., of public lands and waters factors into the degree of certainty and confidence one needs to enjoy those lands and waters.

In the 21st century, digital mapping and GPS technologies have fundamentally changed how sportsmen and women navigate and utilize federal lands and waters. However, inconsistent and outdated record keeping practices amongst federal agencies hinders the ability of sportsmen and women and other recreationists from fully taking advantage of these technologies. Additionally, much of the public water mapping information that is held by federal agencies is still contained in paper format or a format that is not compatible with GPS technologies. Moreover, there are many opportunities that exist to leverage technology to modernize the way in which sportsmen and women plan and conduct trips, as well as ensure they can confidently comply with existing rules and regulations for specific areas. Put simply, users of public lands and water should not have to have a law degree to find information about fishing and boating rules. As an example, the Fish and Wildlife Service alone has 42 pages of National Wildlife Refuge System specific regulations in the code of federal regulations, many of which are tied to waterway navigation, use, and fishing.

For example, this summer I visited Yellowstone National Park for the first time. Leading up to my visit, I explored the Yellowstone guide on the National Park Service app on my phone, as almost all of us who are accustomed to using our smartphones as guides would do when planning a trip to a new area. Upon opening the app and selecting “Things to Do”, there were several activities such as hiking, biking, snowmobiling, etc. that included helpful information such as parking locations, restrictions, etc. When scanning through the list of activities, I noticed that “fishing” or “boating/paddling” was not listed. As an avid trout fisherman that has long desired to fish within Yellowstone Park, arguably the best national park for fly fishing, I was disappointed to see the exclusion of fishing as a thing to do, much less any information on stream access points, which streams or reaches of streams were open to fishing, and which fishing gear types or lures were permissible. Thankfully, I knew that fishing was indeed an allowable activity within the park, but this experience raised the concern in my mind that some visitors to the park may not be aware of the fishing opportunities that exist if they rely solely on the app as many individuals do.

At the risk of singling out America’s first national park, another example of how the MAPWaters Act could benefit recreationists in Yellowstone is an experience that a friend who guides youth

in the park for trout encountered this past summer. When leading a guided trip for several youths to a backcountry lake in Yellowstone, he came across a sign posted at a trailhead indicating that over half of the lake they were going to fish was closed to the public to protect nesting trumpeter swans. The area in which he had permits to camp and fish was within the closed area. Not wanting to break the rule set by Yellowstone, or to disturb the nesting swans, he backed out and drove 30 minutes to call the park ranger service for clarification over the closure. When contact with the ranger service was made, the ranger informed him that the area had previously been closed, but the closure had since been lifted and that the signs were outdated, adding that someone was supposed to have taken them down the previous week and that the trip could continue unimpeded.

I highlight these two very recent and real experiences in Yellowstone Park to demonstrate how the MAPWaters Act can benefit and simplify things for not only anglers in this case, but also federal land and water management officials themselves.

To improve digital water mapping and to modernize public access, CSC Member Rep. Blake Moore introduced the bipartisan MAPWaters Act. The overarching purpose of the MAPWaters Act is simply to modernize, improve, and encourage outdoor recreation for anglers, hunters, boaters, and other outdoor enthusiasts by simplifying public water mapping information. To accomplish this goal, the MAPWaters Act will require the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Reclamation (BoR), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), National Park Service (NPS), and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to modernize and digitize their respective public water mapping information. The MAPWaters Act will uncover new recreation opportunities and help people have their best days outdoors, while making people aware of the rules and reducing conflict and violations. This legislation does not alter, enhance, or diminish any authorities, but rather it simply directs agencies to map existing water recreation rules so that they are clear and available to the public.

Specifically, the MAPWaters Act requires these federal agencies to work through their respective Secretaries to jointly develop and adopt consistent standards to ensure interagency compatibility and applicability among Federal databases within 30 months. Once a consistent standard has been agreed upon, the respective Secretaries will have up to four years to digitize and make publicly available online geographic information system (GIS) data that captures important information for those using public lands and waters. This information includes, but is not limited to, access points, watercraft restrictions, decontamination restrictions to prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species, horsepower and engine restrictions, fishing restrictions and closures, and other information that is critical to have a safe and responsible time on the water. In order to help facilitate the successful implementation of the MAPWaters Act, this legislation authorizes a total of \$21 million for the Department of the Interior from Fiscal Year 24 through 27, and a total of \$14 million for the Department of Agriculture from Fiscal Year 24 through 27.

Importantly, CSF appreciates the inclusion of language in Section 5 of the MAPWaters Act that allows for coordination and cooperation with non-federal partners. If this legislation is enacted, CSF would strongly encourage the responsible federal agencies in this bill to take advantage of the flexibility provided under Section 5 to coordinate with non-governmental organizations, state

natural resource agencies, geospatial and technology companies, among others, to ensure a digestible and well-functioning system of information that truly addresses the needs of hunters, anglers, boaters, and other recreationists visiting our federally-managed waters.

Last Congress, a very similar bill known as the MAPLand Act, also led by CSC Member Rep. Moore, passed the House under suspension on a vote of 414-9, passed the Senate under unanimous consent, and was quickly signed into law by President Biden. The MAPLand Act sought to improve GIS and digital mapping for certain federal land management agencies. To complement this effort, the MAPWaters Act will apply the same general concept of the MAPLand Act to waterways to benefit anglers, boaters, and other users of public waters. The impressive vote in both Chambers of Congress demonstrates that investments to improve mapping information and enhance outdoor recreation opportunities are a worthy endeavor, and we ask that Congress follow the track record of the MAPLand Act with the MAPWaters Act.

In summary, CSF would again like to thank the Subcommittee for holding a hearing on the MAPWaters Act and would like to thank CSC Member Rep. Moore for his efforts on this common-sense legislation that will bring our public water mapping information into the 21st century. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.