

Good afternoon, Chair Bekkedahl and members of the Senate Appropriations Committee;

My name is Nick Ybarra, and I am the director of the Save the Maah Daah Hey nonprofit, an organization dedicated to the stewardship, maintenance, and expansion of the Maah Daah Hey Trail system in the stunning Badlands of Western North Dakota. It is an honor to provide testimony today in support of the Destination Development program within the North Dakota Department of Commerce budget.

The Maah Daah Hey Trail is more than just a ribbon of dirt winding through our rugged Badlands. It is a lifeline for communities across Western North Dakota, a magnet for outdoor enthusiasts, and a symbol of the unique beauty our state has to offer. Spanning over 170 miles, the Maah Daah Hey Trail attracts thousands of visitors annually who come to hike, bike, and ride horseback through one of the most spectacular landscapes in the country. These visitors not only experience the natural wonder of North Dakota but also support local businesses, hotels, restaurants, and outfitters, injecting millions of dollars into our rural economy.

The Destination Development program is critical to advancing our efforts to expand recreational opportunities and grow tourism in North Dakota. Trails like the Maah Daah Hey are essential to our state's ability to compete in the growing outdoor recreation market. Travelers are increasingly seeking unique, authentic outdoor experiences, and the Badlands offer just that. However, to truly unlock the region's potential, we must invest in both maintaining our existing trails and creating new ones.

At Save the Maah Daah Hey, we have an ambitious vision for the future: to expand the trail network in the Badlands to 1,000 miles. This expansion would make North Dakota a premier destination for outdoor recreation, rivaling renowned trail systems in places like Utah and Colorado. A project of this scale would not only draw in mountain bikers, hikers, and equestrians from around the globe but also position our state as a leader in sustainable tourism and land stewardship.

The benefits of this expansion go far beyond tourism. Trails connect people to the land and to each other. They promote physical health, mental well-being, and a sense of community. For young families, retirees, and adventure seekers alike, they are an invitation to explore the great outdoors and to discover the beauty and history of our state. And for the communities near these trails, they are an economic lifeline, creating jobs, supporting small businesses, and fostering a sense of pride in our shared heritage.

However, achieving this vision requires support from programs like Destination Development. Funding from this program would enable us to:

1. Improve and maintain the existing Maah Daah Hey Trail to ensure a world-class experience for visitors.
2. Expand the trail network, connecting more communities to the benefits of outdoor recreation.

3. Promote North Dakota as a premier destination for trail-based tourism, attracting visitors from across the nation and around the world.
4. Train and employ local trail crews, creating jobs and fostering a culture of stewardship and sustainability.

The Destination Development program is an investment in North Dakota's future. It is an investment in our communities, our economy, and our quality of life. By supporting this program, you are helping to ensure that the Badlands remain a destination that inspires awe and adventure for generations to come.

On behalf of Save the Maah Daah Hey and the countless visitors and residents who cherish our trails, I urge you to fully fund the Destination Development program. Together, we can build a legacy of recreation, conservation, and connection that will define North Dakota's future.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Nick Ybarra
Trail Operations Director – Save the Maah Daah Hey