

**U.S. Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources: Roundtable on Issues Related to
Public Lands in the Western United States
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Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to join this discussion on the importance of public lands in the West and the unique opportunities and challenges that they represent. My name is Brent Keith and I am the senior policy advisor for lands on The Nature Conservancy's U.S. Government Relations team.

The Nature Conservancy has over 65 years of experience working with private landowners, and federal, state, local, and tribal governments across the nation. We have grown to become the world's largest conservation organization, working in more than 70 countries to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

First, I would like to say thank you on behalf of The Conservancy and our more than one million members for your steadfast leadership on the public lands package. We are particularly grateful for your efforts to include permanent reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation for the first time in its 54-year history. As our CEO Mark Tercek put it last week, “[u]ltimately, LWCF is about preserving the best of America by protecting our lands and waters, our wildlife and ways of life. The overwhelmingly bipartisan votes in the House and Senate to renew LWCF reflect our nation's longstanding commitment to conservation, ensuring future generations will benefit from LWCF.” Thank you again for your leadership.

At The Nature Conservancy, we believe that we can realize the best results – for people and nature – when we tackle difficult challenges together. That is why we use a collaborative, science-informed, and solutions-oriented approach that seeks to develop and deploy innovative solutions to some of the biggest conservation challenges that we face.

When you look at the public lands across the West, it's clear that these special places play an essential role in our conservation mission. Throughout the Conservancy's more than 65-year history, we have worked with government agencies to ensure the protection of, and public access to, diverse habitats that provide benefits to both people and nature across the United States.

Today, we know that our public lands face increasing challenges from climate change, growing populations and unprecedented demands on our lands and waters. Through collaboration with public agencies, elected officials, and private landowners we can protect and improve the health and resiliency of these lands while retaining or increasing the vital services they provide.

Of course, Congress gave our federal land management agencies a difficult task – to balance the multiple uses of these public resources and to ensure that they provide not just for our current needs, but future generations as well. President Theodore Roosevelt said that it was our “right and duty” to “develop and use the natural resources of our land.” But he also said that we as Americans have a moral obligation to ensure that development of these resources is balanced with conservation efforts that sustain and enhance our forests, prairies, grasslands, and waters.

Achieving this balance isn't always an easy task, and it is a task made only harder by declining agency budgets. We commend members of this Committee for working to reverse this trend and for your leadership in enacting a fire borrowing fix that should help the Forest Service better manage the growing cost of wildfires and invest in addressing forest health issues earlier. But we all know that more work remains to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration to meet the demand.

When it comes to planning for development on public lands, our experience suggests that the most effective way to achieve the requisite balance of conservation and development, and to avoid frustration and delay in project approval, is to frontload the consideration of where certain uses make sense on the landscape; to be proactive, rather than reactive, in planning for development.

The Conservancy's approach uses science to identify potential conflicts between development and conservation priorities, seeks to steer impacts away from areas of high conservation value, and to identify additional conservation actions to offset impacts where they do occur. We have significant experience in planning across large landscapes and building decision support tools to help developers and federal agencies make better, more informed planning decisions while complying with statutory mandates.

At the core of this work is the ability to mitigate for impacts to natural resources. Our experience has demonstrated that mitigation can accelerate infrastructure project delivery. Mitigation is a structured decision-making framework for evaluating proposed impacts—it calls first for considering avoidance of impacts to critical resources, then minimizing impacts, and finally, considering how remaining unavoidable impacts can be offset through the protection and restoration of resources elsewhere. But without clear, consistent federal mitigation policies, decisions will be made on a project-by-project basis, which is time consuming for both federal agencies and project proponents and misses a real opportunity to build agreement among stakeholders about the appropriate uses of certain lands in the planning stage.

The Conservancy is committed to working with the Committee, federal land management agencies and stakeholders to continually improve the management of our public lands and ensure that we retain and build on the multitude of benefits that these special places provide to all Americans. I hope that as the Committee engages in further discussion on public land management, that it will consider mechanisms to better support collaborative decision making with a focus on delivering positive outcomes for communities, the economy, and the environment.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the roundtable. I look forward to the discussion.