

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON
**ENERGY &
NATURAL RESOURCES**



SENATOR MARIA CANTWELL, *Ranking Member*

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**Opening Statement
Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.)
Hearing on Opportunities to Improve and Expand Federal Lands,
Recreation and Water Infrastructure
March 21, 2017**

“Thank you, Madam Chair. I am excited about today’s hearing and to hear from the witnesses, because infrastructure to support our recreation economy is a very important subject.

“Before I get started with my statement, I want to acknowledge one of our witnesses, Jill Simmons. Thank you for coming here today to testify before this committee and welcome as the newest leader of the Washington Trails Association—a very important organization in our state. I thank you for the amazing work that you do.

“When it comes to our recreation economy, a report released at the end of last year by the Forest Service’s Pacific Northwest Research Station showed that in one year outdoor recreationists made more than 938 million visits to federal lands, spending \$51 billion and supporting 880,000 jobs. That is just the federal lands piece of the \$646 billion outdoor recreation economy.

“The report goes on to forecast increased participation in recreation activities on federal lands in the future. The report also describes how these lands have encouraged businesses to locate adjacent to these communities. Unfortunately, the report also discusses how the current deficit and infrastructure needs on federal lands are constraining recreation use. Madam Chair, I’d like to enter that report into the record in full. Thank you.

“Investing in infrastructure is key to maintaining and growing our economy. This is one of the most basic areas where we can grow jobs. I thought President Trump, Republicans and Democrats all agree on that. But we need a budget proposal that can help us do that.

“Unfortunately, that is not what we are seeing in the president’s proposed budget. So, today my colleagues and I are sending a letter to the president detailing how devastating the Department of the Interior and the U.S. Forest Service budget would be to infrastructure and jobs that we need.

“It is ironic that we are gathered to discuss this infrastructure funding after having just received a budget that essentially abandons that entire concept. The president’s budget shortchanges



the National Park Service, slashes the Land and Water Conservation Fund to its lowest level in 40 years and cuts key tribal infrastructure programs. It reduces PILT (Payments In Lieu of Taxes), makes no mention of the Secure Rural Schools program and contains no plausible fix for fire borrowing, which my colleague, Sen. Murkowski, mentioned that we worked so hard on.

“So, let’s look at PILT and Secure Rural Schools. We need to make progress on these issues. We cannot claim to be saving money for an infrastructure package by taking away from the infrastructure funding of states. Whether that’s counties that are working to maintain or improve their schools or doing roadwork in rural communities, we need to work together to resolve these problems.

“The issue is fundamentally about making investments in our economy, particularly for jobs. We need to be looking at the sectors that are the biggest contributors to the economy. Certainly the biggest contributor, or ‘bang for the buck’, is the recreation economy and what we’ve been able to accomplish.

“People spend \$646 billion a year in the U.S. on outdoor recreation. And it’s one of the largest industries in the economy, directly employing 6.1 million Americans. In Washington, there are 227,000 direct jobs in outdoor recreation.

“But what do those big numbers look like when we look at our areas? Recreation in national parks helps support almost 300,000 jobs. Park visitors spent an estimated \$16.9 billion in gateway communities last year.

“Last year, during the centennial anniversary of our national parks, a record 331 million people visited our national parks—a 7 percent increase. Recreation in our national forests provides 194,000 jobs that are created from the National Forest System. That’s about 40 percent of the national forests’ contribution to the GDP—so a very important part of our forest system.

“I know the chair and I discussed these issues, and we would like to have more influence over many of these issues, as it relates to the Forest Service.

“We invited the National Ski Areas Association here today, because I don’t know that members of the public understand how much they contribute to the economy. Each year people spend \$4 billion recreating at ski resorts. And the primary reason listed for 16 percent of the visits to our national forests last year was skiing and snowboarding.

“We have amazing ski places. We have 10 different ski areas on national forests and they generate a lot to our economy.



“We need Congress to significantly increase our investment in our national parks, forests and other public lands.

“Yet with the 12 percent budget cut proposed by the president, the National Park Service and other land management agencies will likely fall further and further behind in maintenance.

“It is well known that the National Park Service’s total deferred maintenance backlog is almost \$12 billion. This figure reflects the failure of Congress to budget in a manner to keep pace with infrastructure needs.

“It has been estimated that the National Park Service needs more than \$800 million each year just to keep the maintenance backlog from getting larger. Yet, annual appropriations rarely meet 60 percent of the annual funding requirements to assess and correctly invest in the maintenance backlog.

“It is a similar story on our national forests. A GAO report released last year detailed the dire condition of the National Forest Service’s trails system. Trails are essential and must continue to be invested in, but less than 25 percent of the Forest Service’s trails are to the agency’s standard for safety and use. Hundreds of thousands of hours are served by local, paid and volunteer crews, like Jill’s crews, and translate to every federal dollar going in, having a \$1.60 local match. So, we need to do more.

“As the chair said, addressing rural communities’ headwater issues and investing in public lands is so important. Much of the country’s water infrastructure is aging and in need of repair. My colleague from Michigan is here. Obviously the failure in Flint, Michigan, and the recent failure at the Oroville Dam in California have brought national attention to the state of our water supply system.

“As much of this infrastructure is aging many communities in the agriculture sector face challenges in meeting their water needs. So, we must invest in ways to improve our business and capacity. This means investing in more collaborative planning like the Yakima River Basin plan and also improving water conservation, groundwater recycling and storage, and recovery.

“Investing in our water infrastructure and our public lands is all about jobs. I hope, Madam Chair, if there is any infrastructure bill that moves this year, that it will include these issues of our outdoor economy, and water as part of that.

“I look forward to hearing the testimony from our witnesses today.”

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