



**Opening Statement**  
**Hearing on the Impact of COVID-19 on Users of Public Lands**  
**Chairman Lisa Murkowski**  
**July 23, 2020**

Good morning, everyone. The committee will come to order. We are a few members shy this morning, including my Ranking Member. As you know, we are in the beginning of a series of votes this morning that just began at ten o'clock, so you will see a little bit of disruption in addition to the hybrid look of today's hearing. But, as we do here in the Senate, we improvise and we're flexible. So, my hope this morning is that we will be able to open the hearing, hear from our witnesses, before we get interrupted again for a second vote. So, I appreciate the flexibility of our witnesses, and welcome to each of you.

We are here this morning to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on users of our public lands, our national forests, and our treasured national parks.

Five months ago, the novel coronavirus became a global pandemic, changing nearly every aspect of life as we know it. Public health intervention measures were necessary to try to slow the spread of the virus, but they have also impacted the use, the management, and the enjoyment of our federal lands.

So, let's start with national parks. They normally attract more than 120 million visitors from March through July. In a typical year, visitors spend \$21 billion on travel, lodging, food, and shopping inside our parks and in our neighboring "gateway" communities.

Now, obviously this is not a normal year, and the numbers certainly show it. Visitation is down 22 percent in our national parks.

Fewer visitors means less income and employment for rural, tourism-dependent small businesses. The National Park Hospitality Association forecasts a 46 percent decline in revenue for hundreds of park concessionaires this year. I think we recognize that sadly, some smaller businesses will not survive.

I saw several of these impacts myself over July 4 recess, when I was back home. I had an opportunity to visit Denali National Park and Katmai National Park. On my way to Denali, I stopped in to the community of Talkeetna just outside the park. This is a community that really relies very, very heavily on that Summer tourism, those tourists who what to come up to see Denali but also those who go climbing the mountain the entire climbing season was cut off this year. I was able to talk with the owner of a flightseeing company; they provide aviation services and spectacular flyovers of the mountain and ferry our hunters around during the fall season.

Their situation is pretty dire right now. They were not been able to receive a PSP, they're very, very worried that they are not going to make it through the end of the year. Normally they operate, during this part of the season they operate upwards of 20 planes on any given day – they only have three in circulation now. I mean that's significant. If you only have three aircraft that means you have fewer pilots, fewer maintainers, it just trickles all throughout. And that business is not alone.

I heard the same from other small businesses within the community. I visited a small boating company; they offer tours up the river. They were only operating two or three boats up the Talkeetna [River] and, again, at a time when their crews would just be going gangbusters at this point in time. Stopped by the local brewery there in Talkeetna, one of the largest employers in that community. They have seen a 60 percent decline in revenue. And then, at Katmai I had an opportunity to speak with the concessionaires there at Brooks Lodge. They are providing only day services, rather than the overnight accommodations. They are going to be looking to see if it is possible to adjust that for a very brief window, maybe a month or so. But, again, this is a lodge that normally would be booked solid for months and months in advance.

These businesses bear the burden of trying to bring in enough revenue to break even or just survive, while also welcoming visitors and ensuring safe, socially distant operations. I was encouraged as I was in the parks to see almost everyone wearing masks, they were adhering to the public health mandates, even in these very, very remote areas.

Outdoor recreation has also taken a big hit in our national forests. The outfitter and guide businesses that operate on these lands are often seasonal, small mom-and-pop shops that really rely on the visitor travel. The loss of customers during the peak season has just been devastating, and in speaking with so many of them, they're looking at having to, again, discontinue their services entirely. I think it's important particularly in a place like Alaska, where whether it's your national parks or your national forests, and the visitation – our visitation is May through the end of September. Beyond that you just don't see people visiting in Katmai in September, you don't see people visiting as tourists in the Tongass in February. It just doesn't happen. So, for those who say we just need to flatten this curve and get beyond it everything is going to be okay, for our industry, for our sector here, it's gone. It's done for 2020. And they are worried whether they can survive through the beginning of the season in 2021, so these are very, very real, and of course it's not just for us in Alaska.

I mentioned winter, and whether or not we do see that level of tourism. We know that winter recreation didn't escape COVID, either. The 2019-2020 ski season was cut short, forcing every ski area on our national forests to close early.

As a skier it was devastating to me, because we had such a great epic ski year, in so many of our areas – and we weren't skiing. The virus is also threatening the way our public lands are used to produce food and water. Dam and canal operators typically finance large amounts of debt to build infrastructure that transports water from watersheds in our national forests to cities and to farms. And family-owned ranchers carefully budget for infrastructure and livestock purchases to ensure rangeland health and productivity under the terms of their grazing permits.

Some individuals are now struggling to pay their water bills and others are buying less meat. This exposes ranchers, farmers, and water providers to financial risks that jeopardize their continued operation.

Impacts on state governments are also having a ripple effect on federal land management. Many state habitat, wildlife, and invasive species activities did not occur this spring or this summer. Some states stopped all non-essential field work, including prescribed burns and forest restoration projects on neighboring federal lands. Others could not spawn fish in hatcheries, which has reduced angling opportunities and could possibly compromise long-term aquatic species restoration goals.

In Alaska we see a prime example of this. The sale of nonresident hunting and fishing licenses accounts for a substantial portion of funding for our Department of Fish and Game. By some estimates, the Department could lose up to 60 percent of its revenue stream because of this year's depressed tourism season. And so, without that revenue, the state's going to have a hard time meeting the matching requirements for the Pittman-Robertson grants or the stateside portion of the Land and Water Conservation Fund. So here we are going to have a great opportunity for access to greater LWCF funds, but if the state can't meet the matching, it's like we haven't helped them at all.

Today, we're going to hear testimony from several public land-user advocacy groups, and as we do it is important to consider the scale of the federal government's reach. It is the single largest landowner in the United States, possessing more than a quarter of all land within our borders—more than 640 million acres in total. The vast majority of those acres are located in Alaska and across 11 western states.

COVID-19 has added a whole new layer of complexity to public land management. We need to ensure the federal government is supporting the users who are essential job creators and environmental stewards, while also respecting the wishes of the local communities who call those areas home.

With that, I turn to my friend and colleague, Ranking Member Manchin.

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