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Opening Statement of
Chairman Doc Hastings
House Committee on Natural Resources
Before the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs
Legislative Hearing on H.R. 2027, H.R. 2154, H.R. 2236, H.R. 2714,
H.R. 2719, H.R. 3009 and H.R. 3117
October 25, 2011

Thank you, Chairman Fleming for holding this hearing on H.R. 2719, the Rattlesnake Mountain Public Access Act.

Let me be very clear about the goal of this bill: to ensure that public access is allowed to the summit of Rattlesnake Mountain, including motorized access. The text of the bill is not overly prescriptive; it simply ensures that the public has access to the public's lands. A law is necessary because, quite frankly, the Fish and Wildlife Service can't be trusted to ensure such access.

To provide some background: Eleven years ago, without local input or Congressional approval, President Clinton issued Proclamation 7319, establishing a monument on 300 square miles around the Department of Energy's Hanford Site in my home town in south central Washington. As many of you know, for many decades, the Hanford Site served as one of the most important national defense nuclear facilities for our nation during World War II and during some of the tensest times of the Cold War.

The Hanford Reach National Monument is unique in that it is currently the only one managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the continental United States. It encompasses 195,000 acres, which is slightly smaller than the area set aside for Mount Rainier National Park. The Proclamation establishing the monument notes that it includes many important geologic, biological and historical resources from 10,000 years ago to more recent homesteads from small towns abandoned for the Manhattan Project during World War II.

Let's not forget, the lands of the monument were primarily in private ownership prior to World War II when the federal government literally swooped in and told landowners that they had 30 days to move their families, their farms, and entire communities so that the secret Manhattan Project could proceed. In the past decades, there was an Army site located on the mountain. There is a road to the top. There is a communications tower on the summit. There is no reason the public can't visit the summit,

Rattlesnake Mountain is on the southeast portion of the monument. For those not familiar, the summit—at 3,600 feet—is the highest point in the area and provides unparalleled views for miles around the monument, the Hanford Site, and the Columbia River.

The majority of public comments received during the development of a federal management plan expressed a need to ensure public access to the lands encompassed in the monument. Prior the release of the final management plan, I urged the Secretary of Interior to make public access to Rattlesnake Mountain a top priority. Unfortunately, the Fish and Wildlife Service ultimately approved a management plan that closed all public access to Rattlesnake Mountain.

It took the Service eight years to write a management plan that closed Rattlesnake Mountain to public access. They've not allowed public tours since that time. After I introduced this bill last Congress, the Service offered two tours for selected individuals, and then suddenly reneged on the offer just days before the tours were to occur, without explanation.

The submitted testimony from the Interior Department infers that the Service supports tours of Rattlesnake but very carefully does not say they will ever allow access to the summit. The summit is the vantage point that allows one to view the entire Hanford Site and monument. If the public can visit the summit of Mt. Rainier, then they certainly should be allowed to the summit of Rattlesnake Mountain. And let me point out there is already a paved road to that leads to the summit of Rattlesnake Mountain.

Furthermore, the written testimony goes on at length on why the Fish & Wildlife Service can't possibly allow public access until after 2012 because of consultation with three Indian Tribes that are known to oppose visitation to Rattlesnake Mountain. With all due respect, what has the Service been doing for the past decade? The position of the Tribes is well known and I fully respect their right to their views, but this doesn't explain what the Service has been doing since the year 2000 when consultation should have begun.

To be frank, the Service has had more than ten years, and they say it will take several more, before whether they can determine if they will allow the American people to have access to the public's lands. This bill is necessary because the only way to guarantee public access is to require it by law.

The lands of the monument and the entire Hanford Site belong to all of the American people. The views of Indian Tribes are legitimate, and they have a right to be heard and consulted, but the views of local communities and all citizens also deserve to be heard and listened to – and there is overwhelming local public support for access to the summit of Rattlesnake Mountain.

Those with the most at stake—the local citizens of the Tri-Cities—strongly favor access to Rattlesnake Mountain, and they are represented today by Carl Adrian, President of the Tri-Cities Development Council. I welcome him and look forward to his testimony. I also would ask unanimous consent to include in the record, a statement from the Tri-City Regional Chamber of Commerce and recent letters from the Board of Benton County Commissioners, the Tri-Cities Visitors and Convention Bureau and the Back Country Horsemen of Washington in favor of this legislation.

Quite simply, H.R. 2719 is needed to ensure that the American people finally are allowed access to the summit of Rattlesnake Mountain, over a decade after this monument was named. It directs the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to provide that access and also authorizes cooperative agreements to ensure that the access is safe, reasonable, and that it respects other important uses of the monument.

Our federal parks and monuments should be available for all Americans to enjoy--not something to be admired from afar and from behind a chain link fence. H.R. 2719 recognizes that people who are allowed to go to the top of Mount Rainier and around the park should be granted similar access to the summit of Rattlesnake Mountain.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.