

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation oversight hearing on “Outdoor Recreation Opportunities on State, Local and Federal Lands”

Thursday, June 27, 2013

Ashley Korenblat, Public Land Solutions

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today. My company Western Spirit Cycling is an outfitter that provides multi-day road and mountain bike trips on public lands throughout the country. We are one of the largest holders of recreation permits in the public land system and work in over 50 different Forest Service Ranger Districts, BLM Resource Areas, and State and National Parks. My company is a member of the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) and I am a past president of the International Mountain Bicycling Association. In my capacity with IMBA, I worked with all of the federal public land agencies to create Memorandums of Understanding focused on collaborative recreation management. More recently I represented the mountain bike industry on over 30 different public land bills and proposals. This work led to the creation of Public Land Solutions, a non-profit organization, dedicated to providing comprehensive recreation planning and stakeholder coordination to support effective and sustainable public land solutions.

This testimony underscores the need to promote and protect recreation on public lands as a critical, growing, and sustainable economic driver for communities across the country.

The Good News About Making A Living Off The Land

Traditionally, making a living off the land required resource extraction through logging, mining or drilling. Today, many communities have shown that it is also possible to make a living on our public lands in a sustainable way through a vibrant recreation economy. Back when the recreation economy began, many hikers, mountain bikers, climbers, and river runners came to town with one pair of shorts and one \$20 bill and didn't change either all week. Those days are over. The recreation community has not only grown, but it has also grown up.

The Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) reports that the outdoor industry contributes \$646 billion dollars annually to the US economy, surpassing both the pharmaceutical and oil and gas sectors, and provides 6.1 million jobs, many of which are in rural communities located close to public lands.

As outdoor recreation has become more mainstream, outdoor vacationers are hiring guides and outfitters, renting hotel rooms, going out to eat, purchasing merchandise from local shops, and using the nearby town's amenities. In addition, the recreation economy does not just create jobs in the service industry, it creates a tiered hierarchy of skilled professional jobs in both the communities near where recreation occurs and where the gear is manufactured, marketed and sold.

Additionally, the Internet Age, has enabled people to live wherever they want, and more and

more of them are choosing communities close to public lands who have invested in high quality recreation opportunities. For example, the mayor of Hood River, Oregon, which is a small town rich in recreation assets from the river to the mountains, told me that a subsidiary of Boeing had just relocated 300 engineers to Hood River because that is where the engineers want to live.

Examples abound of powerful recreation investments. Consider Dead Horse Point State Park in Utah. The Intrepid Potash Company donated \$20,000 for the construction of a 9-mile mountain bike trail at the park. These funds were matched by a second \$20,000 from Utah State Parks, and in two short years, revenue from the park went from around \$400,000 annually to nearly \$800,000. Making this park a net contributor to the State Parks System.

And in Wyoming, at Curt Gowdy State Park, a trail project was started in 2006 when there were about 55,000 annual visitors. By 2011 there were 117,000 annual visitors, and the trails are the only major change during this period. Revenue generation at the park doubled from 2006 -2011 and the projected economic impact on the surrounding region has also doubled from an estimated \$3,000,000 in 2009 to \$6,000,000 in 2012. Several shops in Cheyenne have changed their business models and expanded to account for the impact from trail use, and almost every residence that has sold near the park has cited the property's proximity to the trails as a major selling point.

People continue to value the quality of life that outdoor recreation brings. In cities and towns near public lands, the air and water are clean and the great outdoors is easily accessible. As more and more of these quality-of-life recruits choose to live in outdoor focused communities, they also continue to expand their local economies beyond tourism, through the need for additional professionals from healthcare providers to accountants, which in turn create higher paying non-seasonal jobs of all types for the people who live there.

The Bad News is Lurking within the Public Land System Itself

The threat to these exciting developments lies in the public land management system. Historically the system favors resource extraction. This made sense when it was in everyone's interest to facilitate and encourage resource extraction above all other uses. But in the 21st century we have learned that the consumption of these resources from the earth, can cause more problems that it solves.

One of these problems is the serious degradation of recreation assets upon which many communities have come to depend and on which businesses have invested. While the land managers at all the agencies work hard to sort out these issues, they are often limited by inadequate funding, outdated laws and regulations, and poor or absent inter-department coordination. For example, my company has a permit on the Kokopelli Trail near Grand Junction, Colorado, and technically the BLM does not even have an obligation to contact me if they issue a drilling permit in one of my campsites along the trail. The BLM should be required to notify my company as a permit-holder if they intend or anticipate any change in use.

While we need energy development and the associated jobs, the current system often allows

drilling without regard for other local and regional resources with value, economic and otherwise. For example at Dead Horse State Park, the same place where the trails have been such a success, campers at this iconic location can actually hear the drone of oil and gas rigs from their tents. Will campers return year after year to this campsite? Was it absolutely necessary to drill a well right next to the state park campground?

Land protection is often perceived as a loss of access. However, it does not have to be. Congress has frequently crafted land designations to accommodate the unique needs of a given landscape. When done through a well-constructed community process, legislation can allow for appropriate resource development while preserving important recreational experiences.

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act embodies many characteristics worthy of emulation in management for recreation landscapes. Wild and Scenic designation involves identification of the experiential values worthy of protection on a segment of river. Designation then ensures that those values are protected and enhanced through appropriate management planning and administration. Other uses may be allowed and are generally only restricted if they substantially interfere with the values that lead to designation. A similar legislative designation for recreation—constructed by all stakeholders—could assist with the optimization of the landscape.

Optimization Is The Answer

We need to shift the debate away from the either/or choice of access or protection and work towards optimization. While local residents are lucky enough to live there, public lands belong to all Americans. Successful land bills that optimize multiple uses on public lands come from the blood, sweat, and tears of the locals along side the judicious advice of experienced regional and local organizations, like IMBA. Success always requires compromise. Well-crafted bills involve locals who have dug deep to compromise with their neighbors and fellow citizens—from BASE jumpers to cow punchers to oil and gas companies to wildlife biologists—to find a way to optimize the landscape and meet the needs of all stakeholders.

Legislation created with robust public involvement is the best tool for optimizing our landscapes and permanently updating management plans. Legislation can provide critical assurances to all type of public investors. Yet, public land legislation has been extremely rare in recent years; the last Congress was the first in over 50 years to not pass a single public lands bill. And meanwhile, the Obama Administration leased 6.3 million acres for oil and gas, which is over double what it protected for conservation or recreation.

Many of us who live in communities that depend on public lands have come together to create well thought out, practical compromises that optimize our treasured landscapes and bring great benefits to our lives and the lives of all Americans. We are counting on you, our representatives, to pass these bills, and allow us to implement these much needed improvements in the management and stewardship of our well loved public lands.