

Testimony of Jayme L. Blakesley
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Before the House Committee on Natural Resources,
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
H.R. 5718, Central Wasatch National Conservation and Recreation Area Act
November 15, 2016

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, Subcommittee Chairman McClintock and Subcommittee Ranking Member Tsongas, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony about the proposed Central Wasatch National Conservation and Recreation Area Act, H.R. 5718.

My name is Jayme Blakesley, and I am the General Counsel of the Utah Transit Authority (“UTA”). Prior to joining UTA, I spent ten years working as an attorney for the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration, in Washington, DC.

Today it is my distinct honor to testify alongside Mayor Dolan, Mr. Bonar, and Mr. Fisher. We four are here representing hundreds of others who, through a years-long consensus-based negotiation, have exchanged our time, expertise, and reputations for a once-in-a-generation opportunity to protect our region’s greatest resource—the Wasatch Mountains.

The Wasatch Mountains

More than three quarters of Utah’s population lives within 15 miles of the Wasatch Mountains, a range running approximately 160 miles north to south from near the Utah-Idaho border to central Utah.

The Wasatch Mountains are the life of our community. They are our watershed, a refuge for wildlife, a source of respite and recreation, a driver of our economy, and the symbol of our region.

Because of their proximity to Utah’s population centers, the Wasatch Mountains provide millions of people with unparalleled access to nature and world-class skiing, hiking, biking, climbing, and mountaineering.

Mountain Accord

Utah’s rising population presents challenges for the finite and fragile Wasatch Mountains. These challenges include the protection of watershed and wilderness, control of canyon development, and access to public lands for solitude and recreation. Population growth, traffic, fragmented decision-making, and conflict threaten the future health and viability of the Wasatch Mountains.

To address these challenges, we created a new model. The “Mountain Accord” process brought a variety of local stakeholders to the table—government, industry, residents, and the environmental community—and gave everyone an equal voice by requiring all decisions to be made by consensus. This process replaced the trend of squabbling acre by acre, case by case, and

headline by headline with a comprehensive, consensus-based approach to planning for the environment, transportation, recreation, and economic needs of the Central Wasatch Mountains.

After several years of work, our process yielded the Mountain Accord, an unprecedented agreement among more than 20 organizations and many stakeholders (including Utah Governor Gary Herbert and Salt Lake County Mayor Ben McAdams) to proceed with a suite of actions designed to preserve the watershed and natural environment, while ensuring that future generations can access and enjoy all of the activities the Central Wasatch Mountains provide today.

The Central Wasatch National Conservation and Recreation Area Act represents the first of many actions agreed to by the signers of the Mountain Accord. These same signers collaborated to write the text of the Act, and save for Congressman Bishop (who out of respect for his position as Chairman does not co-sponsor bills presented to the Natural Resources Committee), the entire Utah Congressional Delegation—Members of both the House and the Senate—support this legislation.

Transportation

Some of the most visited parts of the Central Wasatch Mountains are the ski resorts (and other recreation areas) located in Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons. In 2015, approximately 5.4 million people visited Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons. For perspective, this is more people than visited Yosemite or Yellowstone National Parks during the same period.

Each of Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons is served by a single state road. During peak periods, which most often fall on “powder days” with heavy snowfall, traffic along State Road 190 and State Road 210 can be overwhelming, dangerous, and a significant source of air pollution.

UTA has been providing bus service to the Big and Little Cottonwood Canyon ski resorts for more than 30 years. Ski bus service relies on the same state roads and is therefore limited by the same congestion and safety concerns as single-occupant vehicles.

A key action in the Mountain Accord agreement is to improve public transportation connections between the economic and population centers in the urban areas and the recreation destinations in the Central Wasatch Mountains.

The Utah Transit Authority is committed to increasing these public transportation connections. For this reason, in addition to expressing UTA’s general support for the Central Wasatch National Conservation and Recreation Act, I wish to highlight a few transportation provisions in the Act that are necessary for these solutions to be fully implemented.

- Transportation is about access. As stated in Section 3, an express purpose of the Act is to “facilitate and accommodate improved access to the Conservation and Recreation Area for a growing number of users.” A goal of the Mountain Accord is to create access by increasing transit use, walking, and biking, and to decrease congestion by discouraging

single-occupancy vehicle use. UTA is committed to finding the means to improve short- and long-term public transportation access to the Central Wasatch Mountains.

- Transportation is about choices. Without specific language contained in Section 6, paragraph (a)(8)(B)(ii), transportation choices—road and transit—would be limited unnecessarily by environmental laws. Because the transportation corridors and the Conservation and Recreation Area are being created concurrently, the Act allows flexibility to develop the best transportation solution for the unique context of Utah’s geography and weather.
- Transportation is about planning for future populations. Section 6, paragraph (a)(8) of the Act provides for future transportation infrastructure by reserving corridors in Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons that could be developed as a future fixed guideway for public transportation. This is important because State Roads 190 and 210 currently operate on land provided to the Utah Department of Transportation by the U.S. Forest Service.
- Transportation is about coordination. Section 6, paragraph (a)(8)(C) of the Act requires the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of Transportation to coordinate and give priority to National Environmental Policy Act (“NEPA”) (42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq.) actions in the Conservation and Recreation Area.
- Transportation is about safety. Section 6, paragraph (a)(9) of the Act allows access to and installation of devices in the Conservation and Recreation Area for avalanche control. This will allow for safer travel up and down State Roads 190 and 210 in Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons.
- Transportation is about compromise. The Act strikes a balance between the needs for conservation and transportation by, in the same legislation, removing existing wilderness in Little Cottonwood Canyon near the road corridor to allow for study of future transportation options and creating a new Conservation and Recreation Area.

The drafters of the legislation took great pains to anticipate future transportation needs and activities. The bill is crafted to allow all transportation solutions to be properly considered and ultimately completed.

Conclusion

Thirty years ago, when candidates for the Salt Lake County Commission were asked “what their vision was for the [Wasatch Mountains] in twenty years, each answered that they wanted to see the canyons remain as they were at the time.”¹ By this, I believe they meant conserving and protecting the natural and watershed resources, and continuing to make the Wasatch Mountains accessible to a growing number of users.

Today, it is my honor to report that this vision remains. Amid threats from population growth, development pressures, and piecemeal decision making, the signers of the Mountain Accord took

¹ JOHN VERANTH, *HIKING THE WASATCH* 39 (University of Utah Press, 3rd ed., 2014)

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action to ensure we protect the Central Wasatch Mountains, have clean water, and make the investments in transportation necessary to ensure a thriving economy and an exemplary quality of life—for us and for future generations.

Thank you for honoring our commitment by considering passage of the Central Wasatch National Conservation and Recreation Area Act, H.R. 5718.

This concludes my statement.