

THE AMERICAN ALPINE CLUB



March 26, 2019

Senator Lisa Murkowski
Chair Energy & Natural Resource Committee
522 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Senator Joe Manchin
Ranking Member, ENR Committee
306 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Hearing to Examine Opportunities To Improve Access, Infrastructure, and Permitting for Outdoor Recreation

Dear Chairman Murkowski and Ranking Member Manchin,

The American Alpine Club (“AAC”) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with 23,000 members dedicated to supporting climbers and healthy climbing landscapes nationally. Since its founding in 1902, the AAC has been devoted to safeguarding our country’s wild landscapes and natural treasures. We focus on critical issues facing climbers and outdoor recreation nationally, such as keeping public lands pristine, wild, and open to human-powered recreation. We fund conservation projects and scientific research projects; own lodging facilities in New York, Wyoming, West Virginia, Texas, Alaska and New Hampshire; and provide educational and community building events across the nation, among other things.

On behalf of our nation’s millions of climbers, we thank you for your work on the passage of the John D. Dingell Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act. Specifically, we appreciate the law’s protection of beautiful and world-class climbing areas in Utah; the provision that ensures climbing practices can continue alongside the designation of new Wilderness areas; and of course, the permanent reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

As noted in the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources hearing on March 14, 2019, there still exists much work to be done. Investments made by this Committee will ensure that the vibrant outdoor recreation economy, which supports communities across the nation, will continue to grow and prosper. The Outdoor Industry Association reports that the outdoor recreation economy generates \$887 billion in consumer spending annually and 7.6 million direct national jobs.¹ Findings from the US Bureau of Economic Analysis show that Outdoor Recreation accounts for 2.2% of our nations GDP.² Several other economic reports have focused specifically on the economic impact of rock and ice climbing, finding further value added to communities, such as:

¹ Outdoor Industry Association. Outdoor Recreation Economy report. 2017.

² Bureau of Economic Analysis. “Outdoor recreation Satellite Account: Updated Statistics for 2012-2016.” 2018. Available at: <https://www.bea.gov/news/2018/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-updated-statistics-2012-2016>



- The economic impact of climbing in West Virginia’s New River Gorge region generated \$12.1 million in non-resident spending, supporting 168 jobs and \$6.3 million in wages in 2018.³
- Rock climbing visitors to the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre & Gunnison National Forests (GMUG) accounted for \$6.2 million in non-resident spending, supporting 61 jobs and \$1.8 million in job income in the surrounding area, as well as \$5.2 million in annual spending outside of the GMUG but within Colorado.⁴
- Ice climbing visitors to Hyalite Canyon, Montana spend on average \$76 to \$135 per person per visit, or roughly \$480 per person annually.⁵

Interest in climbing has grown exponentially in recent years and in 2018, roughly nine million people participated at least once in some form of climbing, whether indoors or outdoors.⁶ Such growth in climbing points to a clear need for lawmakers to address the increasing number of public lands users through thoughtful land management solutions. The American Alpine Club would like to highlight several issues that concern our membership and propose potential pathways for moving forward.

Improve Access to Public Lands through Facilitated Experiences

Guides and outfitters provide important opportunities for the public to experience the outdoors. However, an onerous and outdated permitting structure has resulted in numerous challenges for commercial and educational groups. While federal land agencies value facilitated recreation and recognize the importance of the outdoor recreation economy in rural communities, the permitting system restricts these groups through fees, burdensome applications and unclear operating requirements. To ensure that lands are open for human powered recreation, the AAC encourages the Committee to streamline and update exclusionary permitting policies to ensure that climbers, guides and other organizations can get the permits they need to provide facilitated climbing experiences. To accomplish this, the AAC strongly supports legislation to improve permitting for commercial outfitters and other businesses on public lands by addressing multi-jurisdictional permits, eliminating duplicative processes and streamlining environmental reviews, among other things.

³ Maples, J. Bradley, M. Giles, S. Leebrick, R. Clark, B. “The Economic Impact of Rock Climbing in the New River Gorge Region.” 2019.

⁴ Maples, J. Bradley, M. “Economic Impact of Rock Climbing in the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre & Gunnison National Forests.” 2018.

⁵ Anderson, M. “Estimating the Economic Value of Ice Climbing in Hyalite Canyon: An Application of Travel Cost Count Data Models for Excess Zeros.” Environmental Management. 2010.

⁶ Outdoor Industry Association. “Outdoor Participation Report.” 2018.



Ensure Conservation Funding Mechanisms are Preserved

The Department of the Interior is tasked with overseeing the management of more than 480 million acres of public land including important climbing landscapes such as Grand Teton, Rainier, Black Canyon of the Gunnison, Rocky Mountain and Yosemite National Parks.⁷ However, the National Park Service has identified over \$11 million in deferred maintenance and infrastructure needs.⁸ Over 60% of climbing areas exist on federal public lands, as such, the degradation of these important places poses a threat to the climbing community. Additionally, access to numerous climbing areas on public lands are inaccessible due to private inholdings. To ensure public lands are adequately funded, maintained, and accessible, we recommend that the Committee:

- 1. Address America's aging national park facilities and ensure that eroding trails, water systems, historic buildings and other infrastructure issues are adequately addressed.*
- 2. Support additional recreation infrastructure through new revenue streams.*
- 3. Fully fund the Land Water Conservation Fund.*

Address Threats to Outdoor Recreation by combatting Climate Change

The AAC represents an outdoor community whose livelihood is inextricably linked to healthy ecosystems and mountain environments. However, mountain regions are warming at twice the rate of other places on Earth and the health of our businesses and communities require comprehensive legislation and administrative action to address the impacts of climate change. From Denali to Mt. Washington, climbers are witnessing rapid changes to these snowscapes and high alpine peaks. Among its many effects, climate change is damaging the places we recreate and live. Increased prevalence of wildfire degrades air quality, melting glaciers and permafrost as well as increased rain, rather than snow, creates dangerous conditions due to expanding crevasses and rock fall. These changes limit the terrain climbers can access and impact the livelihoods of guides and outfitters.

- 1. Track and restrict greenhouse gas emissions from Federal fossil fuel emissions that occur on public lands.*

⁷ DeSantis, M. "U.S. Department of the Interior: An Overview." Congressional Research Service. 2019.

⁸ NPS Deferred Maintenance by State and Park. Data as of Sept. 30, 2018. Available at: https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/upload/NPS-Deferred-Maintenance-FY18-State_and_Park_2018.pdf



Federal oil and gas leasing – both on land and offshore – account for a quarter of America’s total carbon output.⁹ If US public lands were their own country, they would rank fifth in the world for emissions.¹⁰ As such, federal land managers must account for the cumulative impact of oil and gas development on public lands. A federal judge in Wyoming recently decided that the Interior Department violated the National Environmental Policy Act by failing to account for the climate impacts of its oil and gas leasing and temporarily blocked drilling on about 300,000 acres.¹¹ Judge Contreras’s opinion said that the Department cannot consider individual drilling projects in a vacuum and must account for the greater context of the impact of oil and gas drilling on federal land before irretrievably committing to that drilling.¹² The AAC encourages Federal land managers to not only track the greenhouse gas emissions produced on public lands but also to set clear goals in an effort to restrict them. Effectively managing energy development on our public lands is an ideal place to start if we are to reduce our carbon emissions as a country.

Ensure Diverse Voices are Included

The future of our nation’s public lands depends on broad stakeholders who value wild places and access to them. Without such, the number of advocates for our national parks and other treasured landscapes will decline as our country’s demographics shift rapidly. We ask that this Committee strive to welcome and include diverse voices in a meaningful way through public hearings, dialogue with committee staff and through the creation of legislation. A broader tent will add important perspective as the Committee seeks solutions to the pressures of development, the loss of public access, deteriorating facilities and recreation infrastructure, and the impacts of a changing climate.

In Conclusion

The American Alpine Club is greatly appreciative for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. We hope the insight provided here will encourage this Committee and other members of Congress to act swiftly on issues facing outdoor recreation access, infrastructure and permitting. Please feel free to reach out to our team at any point with your questions or concerns.

⁹ The Wilderness Society. “In The Dark: The hidden climate impacts of energy development on public lands.” 2018.

¹⁰ The Wilderness Society. “In The Dark.”

¹¹ Eilperin, J. “Federal judge demands Trump administration reveal how its drilling plans will fuel climate change.” The Washington Post. 2019.

¹² *WildEarth Guardians v. Zinke*, No. CV 16-1724 (RC)(D.D.C. Mar. 19, 2019)

THE AMERICAN ALPINE CLUB



Respectfully,

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