

Congressional Testimony on Outdoor Recreation & Climate Change

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Representative Deb Haaland, Chairwoman
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Examining the Impacts of Climate Change on Public Lands Recreation

Good afternoon Chairwoman Haaland and members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands.

My name is Hilary Hutcheson, and I am a fly fishing guide from Columbia Falls, Montana, which is located at the west entrance of Glacier National Park, America's crown jewel. I got my start guiding at the oldest and largest outfit in the region 25 years ago, washing boats, backing up boat trailers, making sandwiches, and babysitting for the owners' children. I also own and operate a fishing retail store in my hometown called Lary's Fly and Supply. I'm the mother of two girls in high school. Last summer, my oldest daughter made sandwiches at the fishing company, and this year, she plans to drive shuttles for guide trips.

My children are the latest to prove that for generations, my family has lived, worked, and been financially dependent on our nation's great public lands. My grandfather was a skilled alpinist and search and rescue leader at Mt. Rainier National Park. My parents were both national park rangers, first at Mt. Rainier, then starting a family at Crater Lake National Park, where my sister and I were born, and finally raising my brother, sister and me at Glacier National Park.

My parents raised us to explore the rivers, forests, and mountains, and we quickly became comfortable and capable in the outdoors. When a childhood buddy started messing around with a fly rod in junior high, my sister and I joined in. We both began guiding whitewater raft trips in high school, and then we started taking fly fishing clients. Now, I run rivers from spring through fall, including multi-day whitewater wilderness fishing trips in Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex and Idaho's Frank Church Wilderness. My sister is the executive director of a fly fishing program for women with breast cancer, called Casting for Recovery.

My guests come from all over the world, drawn by the awe-inspiring elements found in our country's national parks and public lands, including Glacier's distinctive competitive edge--a vibrant and intact ecosystem.

I am sure you have all seen photos of our Park's diminishing glaciers. I have watched the disappearing act first-hand, and I have had to explain it to the guests on my boat. There were 150 glaciers when the Park opened in 1910, 50 when I started guiding, 35 glaciers when my children were born, and now there are only 26, if we're being generous, as several are just barely hanging on. All are expected to be gone in the next ten years.

I am most concerned with the direct importance of our glaciers to the intact ecosystem. When the glaciers are gone from the headwaters of a basin, there's no longer a source of water for late in the season, when the soil moisture is low and the snowpack is gone. What's *supposed* to happen is that the glacial ice (in the form of meltwater) provides the vital source of water for our fishable rivers where I make my living and provide for my children.

These waterways are home to species of concern such as the federally protected bull trout. These fish do not just need water, they need cold, clean water. So as the glaciers retreat, the volume of water goes down, and the temperature goes up, putting different species at risk, which then can destabilize the entire ecosystem. Fisheries biologists are currently analyzing how rain events happening when it should actually be snowing can scour bull trout nests, called redds, and wipe out future generations of the already-endangered fish. Now, non-native rainbow trout that are heartier in warming waters are breeding with native cutthroat. This hybridization could eek out the native species, again threatening degradation of our competitive edge. Hybridized fish are not evolved and not as resilient. I do care about at-risk species that many global anglers consider bucket-list catches, like our beloved cutthroat trout—our state fish— or the meltwater stonefly and the pika, but most immediately, I care about humans who will lose their jobs, their livelihoods, and their fundamental happiness as this system collapses. These are people I employ, and their families, our neighbors, friends and our extended communities. I care about all the many outdoor-industry dependant communities like ours all across the country.

Every ecosystem has its apex predator. Every political system has its apex issue. Climate change is without a doubt the apex issue of our time.

Today, the state of Montana imposes a rule called 'Hoot Owl Restrictions,' which requires anglers to be off the water by 2:00pm when river temperatures rise to 73 degrees for three consecutive days. Catching trout in water that is too warm and less oxygenated causes excessive stress on the fish. Ideal temperatures for hearty trout species like rainbow and brown trout is 55 to 57 degrees. Cutthroat need it even cooler. 77 degrees is lethal for trout. To be clear, Hoot Owl is a government regulation adopted as a result of rising temperatures from a changing climate, directly impacting the fishing industry. Many of Montana's most famous rivers are hit with Hoot Owl Restrictions each summer, including the Blackfoot, Madison, Gallatin, Big Hole, Yellowstone, Beaverhead, Jefferson and more. Even on rivers that hover below the 73-degree threshold, guides are self-imposing the rule, as an act of vigilance to protect our fisheries, even at our own economic expense.

Recreational fishing is a \$35 billion-dollar industry nationwide. In Montana alone, outdoor recreation is responsible for generating \$7.1 billion annually and providing 71,000 jobs—including mine. Near the Park, the economy is driven by tourism, and dependent on a healthy environment and a stable climate. Last year 2.9 million people visited the Park. Many of my clients tell me they know they have to come see the Park now, before its outstanding recreational values are diminished. Others tell me they are coming to escape the heat, but last summer, Glacier reportedly hit 100 degrees for the first time on record. They come to catch native cutthroat, not weaker cutthroat/rainbow hybrids. I am deeply concerned about the livelihood of my community in the face of a changing climate.

President Roosevelt stated “there is nothing so American as our National Parks,” as “the country belongs to the people for the enrichment of all of our lives.” For generations, my family committed our lives to these important places. But sadly, the work we do— whether stewarding public lands, conserving fish habitat, or teaching my teenage daughters to find the beauty and wonder that is their birthright – feels like evaporating water unless we address climate change first.

I feel fortunate to guide on three rivers protected under the Wild And Scenic Rivers Act. In 1968, US Congress enacted the law to preserve certain rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations.

I am so grateful to Congress for its action 50 years ago, and I’m confident that this Congress will remember that legal commitment and uphold it by addressing climate change. When Congress instructed protection of important rivers, it helped enable my community and many others to drive the outdoor economy that is a thriving \$887 billion dollar economy nationwide. Since Congress went to such lengths to create this safeguard, it clearly intended for future leaders to maintain such high-level care and attention.

Two decades ago, when I first started guiding, I could not have imagined that the icy, slow, drip from the glaciers would ever stop. I did not imagine so many classic western rivers would be too hot to fish on a beautiful summer afternoon. But today, I wish these realities were just in my imagination. Now, I want to imagine that Montana’s outdoor recreation economy and the lifeblood of my community can be saved through climate action. Thank you.