

# OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

May 15, 2019

Rep. Deb Haaland

Chair, Subcommittee on National Forests, Parks, and Public Lands

1237 Longworth House Office Building

Washington, DC 20515

Rep. Don Young

Ranking Member, Subcommittee on National Forests, Parks, and Public Lands

2314 Rayburn House Office Building

Washington, DC 20515

## **Re: Subcommittee Hearing Examining the Impacts of Climate Change on Public Lands Recreation**

Dear Chair Haaland and Ranking Member Young:

On behalf of the human-powered outdoor recreation community, thank you for holding a hearing to consider the impacts of a changing climate on outdoor recreation opportunities.

Outdoor Alliance is a coalition of ten member-based organizations representing the human powered outdoor recreation community. The coalition includes Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Whitewater, International Mountain Bicycling Association, Winter Wildlands Alliance, The Mountaineers, the American Alpine Club, the Mazamas, Colorado Mountain Club, and Surfrider Foundation and represents the interests of the millions of Americans who climb, paddle, mountain bike, backcountry ski and snowshoe, and enjoy coastal recreation on our nation's public lands, waters, and snowscapes.

While the effects on outdoor recreation represent a small part of the grave set of impacts occurring as a result of climate change, these effects will impair the quality of the outdoor recreation experience; cause health and safety concerns for recreationists; and inhibit the outdoor recreation economy. Moreover, as a community of avid students of conditions in the outdoors—from changing river flow patterns, to changes in snowpacks and glaciers—outdoor recreationists often have a unique view into changes occurring on our public lands and waters. We recognize, as well, that the necessity for serious and effective action to address climate change will implicate public lands, and that our community has a responsibility to assist in a transition to renewable energy sources that also protects other resource values, including recreation and conservation.



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The currently occurring—and accelerating—effects of climate change on public lands and waters and the recreational opportunities they support are extensive and increasingly well documented. These effects include:

- Changing patterns of precipitation, potentially decreasing the frequency at which rivers are at appropriate flows for paddling;
- Loss of snowpack, affecting winter recreation opportunities by leaving lower elevation terrain with inadequate snow for recreation, in turn crowding higher elevation areas and increasing user and human-wildlife conflict;
- More frequent catastrophic weather events, damaging recreation infrastructure including access roads, trails, and natural features themselves;
- Coastal erosion from sea level rise and more powerful storms, both affecting coastal recreation opportunities, natural resources, and infrastructure;
- Increased spread of tick and mosquito-borne illness;
- Increased potential for heat-related illness;
- Increased intensity and longevity of fire seasons, resulting in damage or loss to recreational resources, as well as harming recreationists through impaired air quality and affecting the economies of tourism-dependent communities.

To better articulate the effects on climate we are already seeing—as well as the role outdoor recreationists are playing in documenting these changes—we reached out to members of our community to hear their stories. The following are among the scores of responses we received:

- Ski mountaineer Caroline Gleich wrote us from Mount Everest to share the following:

“I’ve seen the effects of climate change all over the world: glaciers shrinking creating more dangerous conditions for mountaineers, highest peaks “lost” to climate change, more dangerous avalanche conditions- more active serac falls. The danger isn’t just for mountaineers trying to climb and ski. So much of our world’s freshwater is stored in these glaciers. It has global consequences for our access to clean drinking water. If we don’t speak up for these wild places, who will?

I’m currently writing this from advanced base camp at 21,000’ in the Himalayas climbing Everest where it is said that temperatures are rising faster than the global average. These high altitude glaciers are canaries in the coal mine for the rest of the world. These aren’t just far off problems in the Himalayas. In my home state of Utah, it is estimated that Park City will lose 100% of its snow pack by the



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year 2100. That isn't just a huge loss for skiers. That's our drinking water and irrigation water. Without water, we die. It's time to take aggressive action on climate, to stop putting the burden on individual actions and enact large scale strategic changes to how we power our grid."

- Luc Mehl, an environmental data manager/analyst and adventurer based in Anchorage, Alaska, wrote:

"I grew up in McGrath, a village on the Kuskokwim River, interior Alaska. McGrath's claim to fame is national news coverage of temperatures hitting -75 F in 1989. My claim to fame is that I've travelled 10,000 miles within Alaska by foot, ski, bike, raft, and ice skate.

As a recreationist, Alaska's warming is most obvious to me in the form of glacial retreat and milder winters. During the past 10 years I've observed changes to the glacier ramps we use to access higher elevations. In some cases, the ice is retreating fast enough to witness changes over a single season. This April, descending the Grewingk Glacier after 80 miles of skiing and kiting on the Kenai Peninsula, we discovered that the glacier had retreated nearly 500 meters since last September. A summer trail used to extend to the ice edge, but now you have to climb ice-cored moraine and scramble through rock ledges to access the trail.

Alaska's winters start later and have warmer temperatures than they used to. These conditions result in less snow at lower elevations. Instead of skis, I've started using ice skates for low-elevation travel. On one recent ice skate trip through the Kuskokwim delta, the school kids told us about the changes they've seen, lamenting the colder winters of their youth. When a ten year old can tell you about the climate change they've experienced in their lives, you know things are serious."

- Benjamin Hatchett, a research professor and recreationist from Northern California, wrote:

"I was born in northern California and have spent my whole life in the northern and central Sierra Nevada. I am an assistant research professor who studies Earth's systems, particularly the interactions of weather and climate with hydrology and geohazards, on time



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scales varying from minutes to thousands of years, with the ultimate goal of improving quality of life for humans and other species. My interest in this topic stems from a lifelong commitment to outdoor recreation in mountain environments, skiing and snowboarding both in resorts and in the backcountry up to 60 days each season, riding mountain bikes, rock climbing, trail running, skateboarding, and paddleboarding.

The vast majority of my scientific research and outdoor recreation occurs on public lands, which provide wonderful natural laboratories to explore. However, I have become increasingly aware of how these landscapes are changing before our eyes. Most concerning is my direct observation that the weather and climate in these places are changing rapidly. These changes have direct impacts on the quality of recreation and the health of the ecosystem (which in many cases is the reason we are there in the first place). In the northern Sierra Nevada, my research has documented a dramatic rise in snow line elevation during storms, with more precipitation falling as rain rather than snow—making us more susceptible to snow droughts and winter season floods, and extending the length of time it takes each season to build a sufficient snowpack for recreation. Recent drought periods, extreme by historical standards, are being exacerbated by warming temperatures. During summer, larger wildfires are decreasing the air quality of mountain areas, at best making visibility poor and at worst destroying life, property, and forests while also creating health concerns for huge sectors of the population and preventing people from working and playing outside.”

- Brennan Lagasse, recently returned from time in the Arctic, wrote:

“I am a college instructor, writer, and ski guide. I have worked on issues related to climate change and sustainability for several years. As I write this, I am just returning home to California after another trip to the crown jewel of the circumpolar north, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Time in the Arctic Refuge, especially with members of the Gwich'in and Inupiat tribes who know the area best, has taught me many things. Scientists have told us for decades that the Arctic is warming faster than anywhere else on earth, almost twice the global average. Sea ice that is normally between 3-12 feet thick has been shrinking dramatically with a total volume loss of 80%+ since 1979. The numbers are staggering, but



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even more compelling is when this quantitative data is coupled with the experience of the Indigenous people who have lived here for thousands of years. These folks talk about new species of fish showing up in the region purely because water temperatures have risen so much. Sea ice has been on a constant retreat, a phenomenon I've witnessed first hand, forcing the threatened polar bear to struggle to maintain their existence. As we sat with a crew filming a polar bear near shore by the village of Kaktovik last week, Inupiaq Elder Robert Thompson explained: 'these bears are losing the ice they hunt from and are coming closer to land to look for food. This is not good.' He's right, of course. It's not good for the Polar Bear, for the residents of Kaktovik, and for the people from all over the world who seek inspiration and recreation in places like the Arctic Refuge. Climate Change is not going away anytime soon, and today it's folks like you who have the power to enact measures to implement safeguards for our quality of life and for the ecosystems we as a species depend on. When given the next chance to take a stand for special places like the Arctic Refuge, and the remaining unique and wild places across our great country, I hope you'll think about your constituents, and about what we hope to leave for future generations. “

- Trail runner Clare Gallagher wrote:

Climate change is so visible on every single one of my runs. From the choked air pollution of major cities, which is from the incessant burning of fossil fuels, both industrial power plants and personal cars and trucks, to the actual climate change impacts of glacier melt and forest fires. I cannot escape it, even living in Boulder, Colorado.... The only two trail races I signed up for this past fall and winter were both cancelled due to forest fires. The Camp Fire and the Thousand Oaks fire. Sure, this impacted my schedule as a professional athlete, but it also killed over 80 people and destroyed over 14,000 homes....

My brother is a green beret, currently on his third deployment. When he comes home to Colorado, nursing his PTSD, he goes to wilderness, to public lands. He is risking his life so Americans can enjoy freedom in our public spaces and live in a world where the air is clean and the politicians do their jobs.... We must transition to a renewable energy economy as soon as possible.”



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These stories help bring to life the changes that are occurring on public lands and waters, but there are, of course, many more.

Our community strongly supports vigorous action to address the causes and effects of climate change and protect the environment which provides recreationists such meaningful experiences—in addition to providing for more fundamental needs like clean air, clean water, and sustenance. We recognize that a transition away from fossil fuels will have implications for public lands, including costs, as well as benefits, and that we have a responsibility as public lands and waters stakeholders to support appropriately developed clean energy solutions, including those sited on public lands. Further, we believe that outdoor recreation opportunities will play an important role in helping public lands gateway communities navigate the economic changes that will be a part of this transition.

We look forward to continuing to work with this committee to advance solutions that address the urgency of the climate crisis, protect recreation opportunities and place-specific conservation values, and ensure that public lands communities are equipped to benefit from the transition to come.

Best regards,



Louis Geltman  
Policy Director  
Outdoor Alliance

cc: Adam Cramer, Executive Director, Outdoor Alliance  
Chris Winter, Executive Director, Access Fund  
Wade Blackwood, Executive Director, American Canoe Association  
Mark Singleton, Executive Director, American Whitewater  
Dave Wiens, Executive Director, International Mountain Bicycling Association  
Todd Walton, Executive Director, Winter Wildlands Alliance  
Tom Vogl, Chief Executive Officer, The Mountaineers  
Phil Powers, Chief Executive Officer, American Alpine Club  
Sarah Bradham, Acting Executive Director, the Mazamas  
Keegan Young, Executive Director, Colorado Mountain Club  
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