

TESTIMONY

CONGRESSMAN DENNY HECK (WA-10)

“National Defense Priorities from Members for the FY 2016 Defense Appropriations Bill”

April 15, 2014

House Appropriations Committee – Subcommittee on Defense

SUBJECT: The need for transportation improvement programs in and around military installations impacted by 2005 round of Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission.

Thank you Chairman Frelinghuysen, Ranking Member Visclosky, and other members of this subcommittee for allowing me to testify today about national defense priorities for the upcoming fiscal year.

I represent Joint Base Lewis-McChord, one of the largest military installations in the country. In the vicinity of JBLM is Interstate-5. This highway is the most heavily traveled north-south freight corridor in the state of Washington, carrying 145,000 vehicles per day. Nearly 80 percent of traffic to and from JBLM relies on I-5. Local travelers in neighboring cities have no other option except to use I-5 as an arterial. When incidents occur, it can take hours to recover. Backups of six miles or more starting at 6 a.m. are not rare, rather they have come to be expected.

This isn't just happening in my district. Floridians are stuck on Florida's State Route 85. People here in the beltway are stuck on Interstate 95, 395 and 495. The almost daily question has become: “What is the hold up?”

The truth is military installations are still adapting to base realignment, and short-term growth caused by troops passing through before being deployed. Installation growth has had a significant effect on regional transportation, particularly when an installation is located in or near an urban area. Even acknowledging the potential for drawdowns on military bases, those reductions would not nearly come close to alleviating the problem.

Surrounding roads play an important role in preserving military readiness. Our armed forces need to instantly deploy and we need functional roads in order to do that. If military personnel are caught in a jam, efficiency goes out the door. The domino effect of delays due to congestion impairs our national security.

This leaves not only military activities on base stranded, but also commerce in the community stranded as well. When we don't have a reliable roadway, economic activity halts. Goods can't move and companies lose money. This cascading inaction affects productivity and balance sheets, putting strain on business owners and workers alike.

To be clear, the military is not to blame for this. In fact, based on the direction of this committee, they've done a lot to help mitigate the problem. They know the opportunity costs involved when their soldiers and civilian workers are stuck in traffic and can't be where they need to be. Bases have come up with innovative approaches to ease the pain, but the problem remains severe and unavoidable without more investment. It is a Band-Aid over a wound that needs stitches.

Let's heal this mess by upgrading the transportation infrastructure around these bases as part of the FY16 Defense Appropriations Bill. I respectfully request that the 2016 bill provide \$25 million in appropriated funds for transportation infrastructure improvements associated with congestion mitigation in urban areas related to 2005 BRAC recommendations.

As you may recall, the defense appropriations bill for 2011 appropriated \$300 million for these purposes. These funds were available through the Office of Economic Adjustment.

Mr. Chairman, while I've been sitting here talking to you today, people that were in gridlock when I began speaking have probably barely budged. They're already late to work or their assignment. They might still be in gridlock when this hearing ends.

We are all too familiar with the horrible feeling of approaching an unexpected slow crawl on the road. But when this affects our military's ability to get to base, do the job, and be ready for anything, that is when we can't just sit and wait for it to get better. We must do more.

Finally, I'd just like to thank you for listening to me at this time last year when I made a similar request to finish improvements to public schools located on military installations. I truly appreciate your attention to that important issue and your work to make that possible.

Thank you for your time.