

Chairman Alan S. Lowenthal
Statement and Script
Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Legislative Hearing:

***Oil and Gas Development: Restoring Community Input and Public Participation
in Leasing Decisions***

June 20, 2019

The Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources will come to order.

Today the Subcommittee is holding the third hearing in its series on the impacts of oil and gas development, with this morning dedicated to hearing testimony on Congressman Levin's H.R. 3225, the Restoring Community Input and Public Protections in Oil and Gas Leasing Act.

Under Committee Rule 4(f), any oral opening statements are limited to the Chairman and the Ranking Minority Member or their designees.

I ask unanimous consent that all other Members' opening statements be made part of the hearing record if they are submitted to the Subcommittee Clerk by 5:00 pm today. Hearing no objection, so ordered.

First, I would like to welcome our witnesses and particularly thank those of you who traveled great distances to be here today.

Since the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act almost fifty years ago, this country has been committed to the idea that people should have a say in government decisions that impact their lives.

This idea is particularly important when it comes to our public lands, which literally belong to all Americans.

The Department of the Interior manages America's vast public lands to ensure these resources are both accessible to people today and protected for future generations.

To carry out this mission, the Interior Department carefully balances its stewardship responsibilities with its other duties, like supporting oil and gas development in the right place and at the right time.

But finding that balance can't be achieved without listening to the voices of the public.

The more the public is involved, the more likely that land-management decisions will be long-lasting, scientifically-sound, and have grassroots support.

That's because local leaders know best what direction the community and regional economy are heading.

Tribal members know best how to identify and protect sacred sites and cultural artifacts.

And businesses owners know best how decisions may attract or discourage future investments.

Energy development decisions are some of the most important that any community will face.

We have heard in previous hearings how oil and gas development impacts public health, cultural resources, drinking water, and farmland.

By listening to those who would be most affected, the Bureau of Land Management can work to minimize these potentially irreversible impacts and avoid conflicts.

But over the last two and a half years, BLM has done the opposite and has prioritized the size and frequency of lease sales over the views of community members and the well-being of taxpayers.

In January 2018, BLM rolled-back important oil and gas leasing reforms that ensured the public had a meaningful say in decisions about energy development on public lands.

BLM shortened the protest period for lease sale parcels from 30 days to 10 days, removed the requirement that the public be involved during lease nominations, and removed a 30-day public review and comment period for environmental reviews.

On top of these changes, BLM has offered millions of acres of land for lease over the last few years with the clear goal of giving the fossil fuel industry as much access as possible.

So, what do you get when BLM steamrolls public engagement while holding bigger and more frequent lease sales across the country?

You get harmful decisions that are opposed by local communities and challenged in the courts.

Take for example proposed lease sales in the foothills of Nevada's Ruby Mountains, leasing near Chaco Canyon and Bears Ears, or efforts to hold a lease sale in the Arctic Refuge.

Each of these is a case where BLM's focus on "energy dominance" has overshadowed the agency's responsibility to tribes.

A silver lining of the Trump administration's pro-fossil fuel agenda is that it has highlighted many of the inherent problems with BLM's oil and gas leasing process that date back decades.

From giving away leases for barely two bucks an acre, to being able to nominate lands anonymously and for free, BLM's leasing system prioritizes the desires of fossil fuel executives and the energy industry's bottom line above all else.

It's time for Congress to hold the administration accountable, restore the public's voice in leasing decisions, and address the unfair advantages oil and gas companies receive when operating on public lands.

Thankfully, Congressman Levin has taken a critical first step in achieving these goals by introducing H.R. 3225.

This is common-sense legislation that will help even the playing field and make fundamental changes to the system to more adequately protect taxpayers and public lands users across the country.

With that, I look forward to the testimony from our witnesses, and I now recognize Ranking Member Gosar for his opening statement.