

Opening Statement of
Ranking Republican Bruce Westerman
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests,
and Public Lands

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 244, H.R. 1267, H.R. 2611, H.R.
3682, H.R. 5040, H.R. 7045, and H.R. 7099
06.18.2020

Chair Haaland, before we get into the subject matter at hand, it's important to address the fact that these virtual hearings are not an equal replacement for in-person debate and discourse. By now, we're all too familiar with being interrupted by reminders for everyone to "please mute their microphones," with members having technical difficulties or bandwidth issues preventing them from voting, or any number of other problems that crop up virtually. The very definition of Congress means "coming together and meeting," and I believe we are neglecting our duties as elected representatives when we trade face-to-face discussion for a computer screen. I strongly encourage both you Madam Chair, and Chairman Grijalva to both cease the broadcast of partisan forums, and to begin scheduling either hybrid or in-person hearings and markups immediately.

To quote Teddy Roosevelt, "Much has been given us, and much will rightfully be expected from us. We have duties to others and duties to ourselves; and we can shirk neither."

Across the street, the Senate is safely holding in-person hearings. They are receiving administration testimony. They just voted a landmark piece of public lands legislation off the floor.

We sometimes deride the Senate for its deliberative, often sluggish behavior, yet because of Committee Democrats' decisions, the Senate is now outpacing us on public lands issues.

Across America, men and women in essential jobs continue working tirelessly to keep our country afloat. The very least that we, as the elected representatives of the American people, can do is show up and do our job. The American people deserve nothing less, and I urge my colleagues to end this sham and get back to work.

Now we do have a number of serious legislative proposals before us today, and I'd like to highlight a few.

H.R. 4257, sponsored by my colleague from Utah, Congressman Stewart, is a commonsense piece of legislation that will help meet the goal of rationalizing land ownership in the west. This bill creates an additional authority for the United States to acquire state lands in federal conservation areas and to compensate the States with replacement federal lands. This bipartisan proposal expands existing authority that allows western States to select federal lands "in lieu" of lands lost to the States when original statehood land grants were completed.

We will also consider H.R. 5040, the AIR Safety Act, offered by the Deputy Republican Leader of this Subcommittee, John Curtis. This bipartisan bill requires a study on drone incursions during wildfire suppression. Although laws exist prohibiting interference with wildfire fighting, many people fly their private drones near fires to take pictures and videos. Unauthorized drones flying in these areas can cause all aerial firefighting tools, including helicopters dropping flame

retardant, to be grounded, which wastes valuable time and money that could otherwise be used to suppress the fire and save lives and property.

We will consider H.R. 1267, which designates the mountain ridge where an Air Force B-47 strategic bomber crashed while on a training mission in Montana in 1962, as the “B-47 Ridge.” The crash killed the four airmen on board. Representative Gianforte has worked hard with the Montana delegation to get this lasting tribute to those brave souls signed into law.

We will also consider H.R. 2611, the Public Lands Telecommunications Act sponsored by Representative Huffman. The bill is intended to facilitate further expansion of broadband access in rural areas, which is certainly a laudable effort and one I support. I do fear this bill fails to fully address the most significant impediments to rural broadband, namely complex and costly permitting processes, such as those required under the National Environmental Policy Act, and the lack of economic incentives.

We will also consider H.R. 7045 offered by Representative Case of Hawaii. This bill is a first step towards the creation of Hawaii’s first-ever National Forest. Hawaii is one of the few States without a National Forest, and the only State that has tropical rainforests.

We will also hear testimony on H.R. 7099, offered by Chairman Grijalva. This bill authorizes an equal value land exchange between the University of Arizona and the Forest Service. For 20 years, the University of Arizona and the

Coconino National Forest operated under the false assumption that the University owned a 13.3-acre headquarters for the V bar V Ranch, a university research center. After being unable to come to an agreement with the Forest Service, the University of Arizona has sought a legislative resolution to the matter.

These are all substantive bills that warrant the Subcommittee's attention. And while I continue to believe virtual hearings and proxy voting fall short of fulfilling Congress's Constitutional duties, this is at least a welcome departure from the highly partisan Democrat "forums" that have been deceptively presented as official Committee business in recent months.

Those "virtual forums" have been held without any Minority involvement. More egregiously, these forums have been distributed and presented in the same manner as official Committee hearings, which is a direct violation of Committee rules.

I urge my friends on the other side of the aisle to follow the agreed-on rules of this Committee and this House, and allow for the thoughtful debate and discourse that have been hallmarks of American representative governance to resume.