

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

Route 209 and Native Plant Species Testimony

June 14, 2022

- Thank you, Chair Neguse and Ranking Member Fulcher, for this opportunity to testify on two of my bills: H.R. 1548 - the *Native Plant Species Pilot Program Act*, and H.R. 6364 - *To amend the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area Improvement Act to extend the exception to the closure of certain roads within the Recreation Area for local businesses*.
- Each of these two bills is critical in their own way.
- I'll start this morning with H.R. 6364—legislation which would protect Northeastern Pennsylvania small businesses and our regional economy.
- As I'm sure the Members of this panel are well aware, the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area stretches across Pennsylvania and New Jersey,

preserving 70,000 acres on both sides of the Delaware River.

- Highway 209, which runs through Pennsylvania and New York, cuts directly through the middle of this national recreation area.
- Up until the 1980s, Highway 209 was a heavily trafficked truck route.
- In 1981, the National Park Service (NPS) received jurisdiction over the section of Highway 209 within the national recreation area.
- And in 1983, NPS prohibited all commercial traffic from using the federally owned highway with one exception: for light commercial vehicles serving local businesses along the national recreation area's boundaries.
- Without this exemption, commercial traffic has very limited acceptable alternatives. Commercial vehicles based in places like Monroe and Pike counties would have to travel a minimum of an extra ten miles to avoid the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.

- Local officials have supported this exemption, which has been reauthorized multiple times since its initial 30-year implementation.
- Unfortunately, the light commercial vehicle exemption lapsed in 2015 and 2021.
- A one-year extension of the exemption is now in place, but it expires on September 30th.
- My bill – H.R. 6364 – would restore the exemption for another five years, instead of one.
- Emergency vehicles, school buses, and commercial vehicles traveling from adjacent businesses, would be allowed to utilize Highway 209, within the boundaries of the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, **toll-free**.
- On behalf of the entire Commonwealth, I would like to thank my House co-lead, Congressman Meuser, as well as Senators Toomey and Casey, who are championing this measure in the Senate.
- This commonsense legislation would go a long way towards minimizing economic disruptions and

protecting local businesses in Northeastern Pennsylvania, and I am grateful to the subcommittee for considering it today.

- I'm, of course, also tremendously grateful for this opportunity to discuss another one of my bipartisan bills—the *Native Plant Species Pilot Program Act*—which is co-led by Congresswoman Stefanik here in the House and led by Senators Collins and Cantwell in the Senate.
- There's a good reason that this bill has such a broad coalition of support: native plants are incredibly important to the preservation of our country's natural resources.
- They provide food and shelter for local wildlife, and—since they are adapted to local weather conditions—they require less water and maintenance than non-native plants.
- They are also beneficial to the surrounding land through their natural properties that help control soil erosion, moderate floods, and filter water.

- However, due to invasive species, temperature shifts, and land-use change, almost thirty percent of the known native plant species in North America are at risk of extinction.
- Across the nation, we are witnessing a decline in native plants.
- And in my home district, Northeastern Pennsylvanians are seeing it up close throughout the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.
- That is why the bill we are discussing today is so important—for my district and for our country.
- This bill would establish a pilot program within the National Park Service to promote the use of native plants in land management activities on public lands.
- It would also study the cost-effectiveness of using native plants in these land management activities, hopefully promoting their usage outside of the pilot areas.

- Thank you, again, Chair Neguse and Ranking Member Fulcher for your consideration of these two important bills. I yield back.