



CONGRESSIONAL WESTERN CAUCUS

CHAIRMAN DAN NEWHOUSE

February 25, 2020

Dear Colleague,

I wanted to reach out to share my sincere concerns with legislation we will be considering this afternoon and tomorrow morning on the House floor. H.R. 803, the *Protecting America's Wilderness and Public Lands Act*, certainly is a massive package pertaining to millions of acres of land – but my intention with this letter is not to get into the weeds of the details of the package – each of our offices have that information at this point. Rather, as the new Chairman of the Congressional Western Caucus, my intention is to humbly seek to lend a voice to the many Americans who have grave, substantive concerns that the impacts of this legislation will further harm rural communities in the West who have already been devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic.


This morning, I joined our colleagues Representatives Chris Stewart and Yvette Herrell to hear from community leaders in Utah and New Mexico about the negative repercussions they are experiencing due to President Biden's moratorium on oil and gas leases on federal lands – specifically the severe funding shortfalls that are now going to burden states, local communities, and school systems in many states in the West. We heard from county commissioners and education officials, and one of our guests shared – in tears – the devastating stories of students experiencing mental health struggles and attempted suicide due to the ongoing challenges facing our nation's students. The last thing these communities need is to face budgetary deficiencies that threaten the support systems within our public schools; this legislation will contribute to those very budget shortfalls.

Two weeks ago, I joined Representatives Dusty Johnson and Kelly Armstrong in Philip, South Dakota to hear from local small business owners who have been left behind due to President Biden's executive order cancelling the Keystone XL Pipeline permit. The stories shared around the table were nothing short of heartbreaking. Small business owners shared accounts of indefinitely shuttering their doors, community members reflected on the extreme economic losses for South Dakota and the surrounding region, and others spoke to the sheer number of jobs that have been and will be lost due to the President's action. One woman summed it up solemnly: "We get caught up in dollars and cents, we get caught up in money, we get caught up in the economy – but behind it all, there are human lives that are being destroyed."

I hope you understand that I am not opposed to conservation – far from it. As a lifelong farmer, I have always considered myself on the front lines of responsible conservation efforts. My livelihood depends upon the health of our lands and natural resources. Similarly, the livelihoods of ranchers, miners, foresters, and pipeline workers are also dependent upon active, responsible management of our lands; the legislation before us will hurt the lives and livelihoods of Americans in the West.

We, as Members of Congress, have a responsibility to listen to these voices. The process to bring this legislation to the floor was disappointing. The lack of hearings, markups, or input from the minority was frustrating, but the continued disregard of our constituents' in rural America is unacceptable and wrong. The combination of the COVID-19 pandemic, the moratorium on federal leasing, and now this legislation – which cuts off responsible and important critical mineral development on 1.2 million acres of public land and further restricts another 1.5 million acres of – is simply going to devastate rural communities in the West.

With this note, I hope that my colleagues who plan to support this package of bills simply pause and consider the negative consequences of this legislation on human lives. I can list many other concerning consequences – from harming our energy independence and restricting public access to our lands to increasing the poor health of our nation's forests – but more than anything, I hope you will pause to think of the human impacts this package will have on our neighbors and fellow Americans and the toll it will take after one of the most challenging years in our lifetimes.

Sincerely,


Dan Newhouse