



GUEST COLUMN

Montanan, Idahoan “Tied to the Land” Testify in D.C.

The message to Capitol Hill: We are new voices. We are not the voices of industry and we are not the voices of environmentalism. We are a third way and we are rapidly becoming the new way of doing business in the West.”

By Guest Writer, 7-21-10

Last week, Congress turned to an unlikely group to explain how public lands management and policy are affecting rural jobs and communities – people who are actually tied to the land. Not lobbyists or lawyers, but real people from places a long way from nowhere like Condon, Mont., and Salmon, Idaho.

They came at the request of Congressman Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), chair of the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands. Grijalva is frustrated with a national dialog that he said has erroneously put forward a false choice between economic development and conservation in rural places.

The testimony at the subcommittee’s hearing was hopeful and solution-oriented, but laced with a dire urgency to reverse the gridlock and contention that have eroded both livelihoods and landscapes in the West.

Melanie Parker lives in Western Montana’s Swan Valley. One hundred miles south of Glacier National Park, the Swan Valley has lost about half of its businesses and two-thirds of its elementary school enrollment in the last 15 years, mostly as logging activities halted on both public and private lands.

The largest landowner, Plum Creek Timber Company, was preparing to sell off corporate timberlands for more lucrative residential development. That prompted national NGOs like the Trust for Public Lands and the Nature Conservancy to team up with a long list of community-based organizations like Parker’s Northwest Connections to purchase and transfer the Plum Creek lands to the Forest Service. These groups and many others also hammered out an agreement to get the environmental community to buy off on sustainable forestry activities on the new and existing public lands in the project area.

Parker told subcommittee members that until all the players interested in the Swan Valley’s landscape forge common ground, economic stability will continue to be elusive. “Without social agreement on what constitutes land stewardship, we quickly get locked up in contentious appeals and litigation,” she said.

Parker believes the coordination of such efforts has to come from the community, with federal and state agencies signing on as willing partners.

Kristin Troy, of Salmon, Idaho, echoed the statement that solutions coming from the ground up are much more durable than those pushed from the top down.

Troy, a native of Salmon and the director of Lemhi Regional Land Trust, said despite pressures, ranching continues to hang on in the Central Idaho community flanked by the Frank Church

Wilderness and the Continental Divide. But, if the country wants to save farming and ranching jobs, the time to do so is now.

"We know from the loss of our timber industry that once the infrastructure and skilled labor is gone, starting over is complicated and expensive. In a way, the decline of a rural economic sector is not so different from the decline of a species. By the time you are threatened and endangered, you are complicated and expensive," Troy testified at the hearing.

Threatened and endangered species are something Troy and Central Idaho ranchers are becoming increasingly familiar with. Funding to help improve some of the Chinook salmon's most inland habitat has gone toward purchasing conservation easements on privately owned ranch lands in the scenic valley. Troy said the best federal programs provide landowners with options to stay viable and ask them for input as to how changing management practices like grazing techniques might help achieve conservation objectives.

"Collaborative efforts and community-based organizations have a unique ability to put politics aside and focus on these incredible landscapes. As we work together to find solutions, we get to know and trust one another. Going out on the range with a rancher or walking in the woods with a forester, you get a chance to hear the wisdom that comes from working and living on the land. Involving relevant members of the community in these important discussions as equals adds an element of respect that is too often missing outside the collaborative process," Troy commented.

Parker asked the subcommittee to pay attention to the grassroots efforts. "I hope that as you listen to the testimony of my fellow panelists you realize that we represent something very important. We are new voices. We are not the voices of industry and we are not the voices of environmentalism. We are a third way and we are rapidly becoming the new way of doing business in the West."

Whether Grijalva and his colleagues on Capitol Hill can follow suit and create a new way of doing business in the Beltway remains to be seen. Grijalva seemed energized after the hearing. "We finally heard from people who are tied to the land about ways we can help them, things we can do to change. We have to look at this new reality and stop this constant assault from people who insist that public lands kill rural areas and rural jobs."

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