

West Yellowstone, Montana  
Testimony before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources'  
Subcommittee on National Parks  
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Senator Daines, other Honored members of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources' Subcommittee on National Parks, and other guests, I am pleased to be asked to present information to you today about gateway cities, National Parks and the impacts faced by each and full well knowing that each impacts the others.

Gateway communities such as those represented at this hearing economically rely on tours and recreation. They are our lifeblood. Many, many things can affect the blood flow. Public policy, weather and natural events nearby and even world-wide can constrict or open the flow. Specifically today I would like to address fires in National Parks, dramatic increases in visitation, and access.

The item that gains the most notoriety are fires. They are dramatic, photogenic and alarming! And they can go on for months. In recent years, Yellowstone's gateway communities have gone through several iterations of impactful fires.

Due, I believe, to the recognition that entities cannot work in isolation, there has been a significant shift to transparency and cooperation. Two summers ago, and again this summer, West Yellowstone has been directly affected by fires that encompassed both Forest Service and Park Service lands very near to our community. Both Gardiner and Cooke City have had their share of challenges with fires, too.

Some citizens are of the opinion that all fires should be managed to suppress while others are more accepting that fire is critical to the maintenance of healthy forests and that they will be a part of the landscape. Regardless of those positions, West Yellowstone has, especially in more recent years, experienced tremendous openness and cooperation from public agencies and we are grateful. We feel our local representatives are included in the decision-making processes and we value, too, the joint participation by in public meetings and information dissemination.

Fires definitely have a price tag across a broad spectrum of resources: public, private sector and individual citizen. Balancing benefit to cost will always be challenging and we, as gateway communities, highly value the assurance that we will be contributors to the discussions and decisions.

Over the past few summers (excluding last with the eclipse) we have become aware that August, normally one of the busiest months of the season, has begun to lose ground. This could be due to many factors including school calendars. Nonetheless, a question we are beginning to hear from locals is, “Could it be that visitors are consciously or subconsciously beginning to avoid this month because of concerns about the presence of smoke?” Known for its mountains and stunning vistas—is compromised visibility and potential restriction of activity beginning to cause prospective visitors to rethink plans to visit the West post-July.

We, in West Yellowstone and many locations throughout the region were affected this summer by smoke beginning in early July. First was the impact from fires in California and Oregon, then from Canada and on to Idaho before there were fires burning in the more local areas. It would be my estimation that there were very few days between the last two weeks of July and mid-September that smoke, in varying degrees, was not in the air.

More than a century of hard suppression of wildland fires and the impact it has had on our forests cannot be overcome quickly. Nevertheless, the time for further exploration into a more comprehensive plan has come. We do not say this lightly and fully recognize that any solutions need to be openly discussed with all parties having seats at the table.

Next, I would like to address the dramatic increase in visitation over the past few years and its impacts. Yellowstone is known world-wide and for many internationals it is on their “bucket list.” The result?

Traffic jams (sometimes miles and hours long), overflowing parking lots and restrooms, challenges with languages, disrespect for wildlife and an underground plumbing system not subject to man. These all dramatically affect the Park and bleed out directly and indirectly into the bordering communities.

We highly desire to be partners in working through the challenges—in other words, a seat at the table.

The way will not be easy. We look to and for solutions that will enhance visitors experience while not adversely offsetting the economies of gateway communities. With over four million visitors, five gateways and four US highways, answers will need to be multi-faceted responding to an army of stakeholders. And, in the end, maximum security for the incredibly unique natural resource that is Yellowstone.

We appreciate the Park Service's commitment to research that is well under way and that will inform and guide visitor management decisions and planning. Additional funding for all our Parks and Monuments as they grapple with current increased visitation and that which is expected to come, would be a blessing.

I wish to express appreciation to Senator Portman for the introduction of the Restore Our Parks Act and to Senator Daines, too, for all of his work in championing the Act. This Act, by addressing the back-log of infrastructure needs, could enable more of the regular Park appropriation to find its way into additional staffing integral to addressing many of the visitor management challenges of the increased visitation.

Additional gate staffing, wildlife monitors and parking lot supervision would seem to be areas of focus that could enhance the experience for most visitors while researching and developing other additional, long-term solutions.

Lastly, at this time, I would like to address access to public lands. To our east lies Yellowstone National Park and on our other three sides the vast majority of land belongs to the United States Forest Service. We are, truly, an impacted community—rather like a wisdom tooth. Hence our survival depends on access to these public lands.

Recognizing that this hearing is particularly focused on Yellowstone, these remarks are intended with that in mind. Nevertheless, to some degree, they are related to all federal lands.

With reference to Yellowstone's visitation management, access will be an essential element of those discussions.

West Yellowstone has long desired year-around access to the Park instead of the current fall and spring closures of our gate. Each closure is approximately six weeks in length and the result is very like a spigot being turned off. Certainly seasonal affects would continue (after all, we have seasons!), however, our community would be able to better develop a more sustainable year-around economy with such a change. And visitors could more readily be satisfied.

With Yellowstone on the bucket-list of both citizens and international visitor throughout the world, rarely is "time of the year" considered. Yellowstone is the goal! Everyone understands that weather can impact a vacation; however, the planned, extended, closures are confusing and many visitors arrive to be greatly disappointed.

Access. It is essential. And, at this time, I do not believe that I can add anything more on that topic. It would be challenging and exciting to experience. We would like that opportunity.

Thank you again for committing to be here in Gardiner and Yellowstone and asking to hear from local voices. We appreciate your time and dedication to serving.