Committee on 'Natural' Resources

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110th Congress
Agenda of American Values

***"The object of government is the welfare of the people ... Conservation means development as much as it does protection. I recognize the right and duty of this generation to develop and use the natural resources of our land; but I do not recognize the right to waste them, or to rob, by wasteful use, the generations that come after us."* - Theodore Roosevelt, "The New Nationalism" speech, 1910**

Addressing America's Energy Needs

Providing sufficient energy for America is critical to our national defense and our economic security. Federal lands – the lands that belong to all the people – provide a significant share of our energy resources, and it is essential to ensure a fair return to the people on resources extracted from public lands. Today, the Nation's federal lands are providing nearly one-third of total U.S. energy production, up from just over 10 percent in 1970. This growth in energy production on public lands has been driven largely by America's over-dependence on oil. Unfortunately, this increased production has done little to decrease our foreign oil consumption. In truth, this single-minded approach to meet our energy needs by opening up more federal lands to extraction of nonrenewable energy ultimately places future generations at greater risk to the whims of foreign fuel producers. This Nation must make a serious commitment to developing new fuels, improving the efficiency of existing fuels, and stimulating responsible production on non-federal lands.

Empowering Insular Areas

The U.S. territories of Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands are challenged with a multitude of issues that prohibit their full political and economic development. We have a responsibility to see that Federal policy be considerate of the unique economic impediments confronting each respective insular area. Equally important, we must recognize that there is an inherent right of political self-determination. For a majority of our territories, the circumstances of history and acquisition are similar; however, time lines to establish any other political status will vary. When appropriate, we should work toward providing clear direction to achieve political status consistent with the U.S. Constitution. Continued oversight on the Compacts of Free Association with the

Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of Palau are also necessary.

Ending Corporate Welfare

The Mining Law of 1872 is a relic of bygone days, written in the pioneering era to encourage the development of the mining industry and the settlement of the western U.S. Today, however, it defies logic to allow multinational corporate conglomerates to mine valuable hardrock minerals such as gold and silver from western federal lands without paying a royalty to the people of the United States, or to allow such corporations to purchase these lands at 1872 prices. The Mining Law must be reformed to take into account the public interest.

Ending Drilling in the Federal Treasury

In return for the right to drill on federal lands and in federal waters, energy companies are required to pay royalties – a share of their proceeds – to the government. The oil and gas royalties system has never worked. Instead, it has proven to be a form of corporate welfare that has enabled oil and gas producers to undercut payments due the American people. Worse still, the Interior Department has failed to effectively oversee the program, allowing the industry to ride a lucrative wave at taxpayer expense. The American people are owed a fair value for the resources that they own. This unseemly raid on the federal Treasury cannot be allowed to continue.

Enhancing the Potential of Our Public Lands

From rugged mountains and painted deserts, to windswept prairies and ancient forests – our Nation's unparalleled public lands are an integral part of creation. They conserve stunning landscapes and irreplaceable wildlife, while also providing refuge for the body and soul. These vast public lands offer many of the critical resources Americans count on in our daily lives, including timber, minerals, coal, and oil and gas. However, it is essential to strike a balance between our dependence on these lands and our responsibilities as citizens to properly steward these unique places. In doing so, our Nation is assured that our priceless public lands will continue to provide forest and range for unique American wildlife, a sanctuary for those symbols of the American West, wild horses, as well as serve as a place for citizens to seek inspiration and renewal – a touchstone of who we are and what we stand for as Americans. Sound resource policy and public participation are needed to enhance the potential of our National Parks, our 500 National Wildlife Refuges, National Forests, wilderness areas, and other public lands. America has a duty to ensure that these places will be there for our enjoyment and the enjoyment of generations to come.

Ensuring Sustainable Water Supplies for the West

Highly productive agricultural regions and rapidly growing urban areas in the Western states are facing severe and prolonged drought conditions and manmade imbalances in the allocation of scarce water resources. State governments and water experts recognize that numerous and varied factors can have a dramatic influence on the availability of water in the West. Water suppliers in Southern California and other urban areas in the West are taking extraordinary steps to conserve existing water supplies and to develop new water supplies using technologies that were prohibitively expensive just a few years ago. And all around the West, pressure is building to restore rivers and streams that have been damaged by poorly planned and destructive water development projects. Unfortunately, budget priorities for water are still being written to address the water supply priorities of the 1930s and 1940s, and restoration projects have been forced to compete for limited funds. We need to direct funds to new and innovative projects to develop new and sustainable water supplies, to help communities recycle water and create new supplies through desalting ocean water in coastal areas where appropriate, and to aggressively direct priority attention to projects that will restore watersheds and aquatic habitats.

Honoring Our Oceans

Despite the love Americans have for their coastlines, as well as their appreciation for fish and the health benefits of seafood, our oceans are in trouble. According to a November 2006 report published by a group of international ecologists and economists, close to 30 percent of fished species worldwide are collapsed – and if this steep decline continues, the world will run out of seafood by 2048. Additionally, an in-depth study conducted and reported by the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy (USCOP) estimated that about 20 percent of domestic species are overfished. By holding hearings on the USCOP findings and implementing appropriate recommendations – including reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act – the Congress can take steps toward maintaining healthy oceans, keeping corals and marine mammals alive, ensuring that our fisheries are sustainable, and protecting jobs. We must seize the opportunity to make positive changes in the way we manage and protect our oceans.

Investing in Our Forests and Forest Communities

Our National Forests provide abundant benefits to Americans, such as safeguarding clean drinking water, providing critical habitat for fish and wildlife, and creating access to recreational opportunities. But the condition of our forest heritage, the transportation infrastructure, recreation facilities, and dependent communities have been compromised due to severe funding deficiencies and skewed management policies. Reinstating sound management and stewardship to forest policy would restore the balance to forest ecosystems, and protect and empower local communities. Sound forest policy includes balancing timber production with forest

restoration. Unique opportunities now exist on forests to use timber, not only for traditional products, but also for addressing growing alternative energy needs through biomass generation. A common-sense management policy would prioritize addressing road maintenance backlogs before constructing new roads, and concentrate on creating jobs and protecting communities.

Keeping Faith with Native Americans

Compared to all other demographic groups, Native Americans suffer a death rate that is 650 percent higher from tuberculosis, 420 percent higher from diabetes, 770 percent higher from alcoholism, and 280 percent higher from injuries. The Indian Health Care Improvement Act provides for the delivery of health service for over 1.3 million American Indians and Alaska Natives throughout the nation, yet it was allowed to expire in 2001. Each year since, legislation to reauthorize the Act has been pending before the House of Representatives, but the Republican leadership has failed to permit its consideration. Keeping faith with Native Americans in part demands that Congress act immediately to reauthorize the Indian Health Care Improvement Act this year.

Maintaining Public's Right to Know

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) has become more than just a landmark law for environmental protection. For more than 30 years, NEPA has reflected the belief that American citizens have a right to know and be heard when their government proposes major actions – such as construction of a dam – that may affect them, their environment, their property values, their communities, and their way of life. NEPA requires federal agencies to disclose the potential environmental impacts of their actions, to propose reasonable alternatives to such actions, and to involve the people in the decision-making process. For example, NEPA allows local communities to challenge power lines that would be constructed over a school. NEPA is the legal backstop that requires federal agencies to consider, disclose, and evaluate the potentially irreversible consequences of actions such as clear-cutting a forest, or filling in wetlands for construction of a shopping mall. However, the Bush Administration has undermined NEPA's good government protections for citizens. The people's right to know is a basic tenant of our government, and laws, such as NEPA, must be effectively protected and maintained.

Reclaiming America

Throughout the Appalachian and other coal mining regions across the country, there remains a high number of abandoned mine sites that are an endangerment to public health and safety, as well as the coalfield environment. The fees assessed on the coal industry that finance the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Program are currently set to expire at the end of fiscal year 2007, leaving the program significantly short of the resources needed to reclaim all remaining high priority sites. This program should be reauthorized by the 110th Congress.

Respecting Sacred Sites

Across the country, sites of religious importance to Native Americans are in danger of becoming casualties of the Administration's push to open federal lands to development. Despite several laws in place aiming to protect the religious freedom of Native Americans and the historic and cultural value of their lands, there is no comprehensive approach or enforceable law to protect sacred lands from energy development and other potentially harmful activities. It is increasingly critical that Congress enact a comprehensive law to empower Indian tribes to protect sacred places in Indian Country.

Returning Common-Sense Stewardship to Our National Parks

For nearly a century, the National Park Service has sought to conserve our country's significant natural, cultural and historic areas. Places such as the Grand Canyon, Gettysburg, or the ancient pueblo dwellings of Mesa Verde are all eloquent characters in our American story. These sites are meant to be managed by the National Park Service in a way that will provide for their enjoyment, yet leave them unimpaired for future generations. Achievement of these goals requires balance, vigorous public participation, common sense, and humility in the face of the challenge before us. But consistent underfunding and misplaced management priorities have left park infrastructure crumbling and park resources degraded. There are even instances, such as the management of Bison in Yellowstone National Park, where current policies are causing the destruction of an American icon. We must commit to careful review of park proposals to ensure that they are consistent with the overriding mission of the National Park Service, and conduct oversight of decisions made by the Administration to ensure sound stewardship of our natural and cultural heritage.

Safeguarding God's Creatures

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) was founded on the very belief that mankind has a responsibility to be a good steward of the earth. The ESA is the embodiment of America's commitment, in the words of President Richard M. Nixon when he signed the Act into law, to preserve "the rich array of animal life with which we have been blessed." The law recognizes that our natural world is immensely complicated and that the loss of one species is a threat to the careful balance upon which we all depend. With adequate funding, Federal agencies could use tools in the law to recover threatened and endangered species, reduce the number of species that are candidates for listings, and work with landowners to address their concerns in a timely manner. There must also be oversight to ensure that Administration policies result in species conservation – so that future generations can enjoy the polar bear, wolf, bald eagle, caribou, and other creatures in all their glory.

"... all things share the same breath – the beast, the tree, the man ... the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports." -Chief Seattle, Duwamish