

Pat Williams, Senior Fellow
O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West
The University of Montana

Natural Resources Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
February 28, 2007

When Bob Dylan wrote the words “The Times They are A-Changin’,” he could easily have been referring to the West.

Today’s West has undergone a significant transition—our economy, population and culture have changed. An historic threshold has been crossed, particularly in the states of the Rocky Mountains. The West is no longer what it was—nor are we who live there what we once were. We now live in an Evolving West.

Most Americans know the story of the Old West. It was the stuff of myth, inaccurate but comfortable. Myths have a way of arresting ambiguity. The Hollywood movie director and producer John Ford, whose films include *Wagon Train*, *Fort Apache*, and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, was once asked, “Did you show the West the way it was?” Ford replied, “Hell no. I showed it the way it should have been.”

For two centuries that Old West, including Montana, which we once proudly called “the Treasure State,” had an economy based upon extraction: timber and mining, oil and gas. Most of the New West, including Montana which, with equal pride, we now call “the Last Best Place,” has made the transition from that old extractive economy and culture to a new one based on conservation, restoration, high tech and services. That early economy, the extractive economy, experienced its significant decline because of increasing productivity, worldwide competition, the international setting of commodity prices, and a fairly recent national and region-wide environmental ethic. The West and its old industries cannot return to those heydays of yesteryear even if we wanted to. The transition was, and its affects continue to be, wrenching. People and places still feel the displacement. Whether that will be an asset or liability depends, at least in part, on purposeful leadership. But we cannot deny the effects and power of the marketplace. The throes of the transition have passed and today’s West is our future. We can rail against it and be swallowed or guide it and prosper.

Yes, subdivisions have replaced some sawmills, but our economy is healthier due to this new economic diversity. Taking care not to pave ourselves over with malls and parking lots, we westerners now realize that we can protect the land’s ability to sustain us. Safeguarding watersheds and corridors, preserving our parks and playgrounds, and assuring decent wages and working conditions are tall orders, but we can meet the challenges if, at home, we set aside paranoia and intolerance and recognize that government at all levels is an asset and if here on Capitol Hill you will strive, as you are today, to understand today’s West.

One of the markers, the indicators of today's West, is the sharply rising numbers of organizations and initiatives. In my written testimony I have listed only some—ones that, among others, have been created to reflect, inform, and consider the many facets of the evolving West.

- Headwaters News
- The New West Network
- Colorado College's Report Card of the Rockies
- The Atlas of the New West
- Western Progress
- The New West Project
- Sonoran Institute
- Natural Resources Law Center – University of Colorado
- Center of the American West – University of Colorado
- O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West – The University of Montana
- Public Policy Research Institute – The University of Montana
- Ruckelshaus Institute of Environment and Natural Resources – University of Wyoming
- Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy – University of Arizona
- Andrus Center for Public Policy – Boise State University
- The Wallace Stegner Center for Land, Resources and the Environment – University of Utah
- Marias River Watershed – Liberty County, Montana
- Great Gallatin Watershed Council – Bozeman, Montana
- Upper Yellowstone Watershed Basin – Emigrant, Montana
- Idaho's Bounty – Ketchum, Idaho
- Smart Growth Advocates – Pueblo, Colorado
- Citizens for Dixie's Future – Hurricane, Utah
- Landowners Association of Wyoming
- Grow Montana – Butte, Montana
- Sustainability Alliance of Southwest Colorado – Hesperus, Colorado
- Sustain Taos – Taos, New Mexico
- Southwest Marketing Network – Hesperus, Colorado
- Property and Environment Research Center (PERC)
- Foundation for Research on Economics and the Environment (FREE)
- Corporation for the Northern Rockies
- Greater Yellowstone Coalition
- Grand Canyon Trust
- Quivira Coalition
- Red Lodge Clearinghouse

I would like to pay particular mention to five: the Sonoran Institute, the Udall Center for Public Policy, the Wallace Stegner Center at the University of Utah and two with which I am affiliated—the O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West which is a western regional studies center located at The University of Montana and the final one is new: Western Progress. The latter is a new public policy advocacy center with offices in Phoenix, Denver and Missoula,

Montana. It is a non-partisan organization dedicated to co-ordination and advancement of progressive policy solutions throughout the eight states of the Rocky Mountain West.

All of these relatively newly-formed groups reflect not only on the West's traditional role as an incubator of ideas, but are also reflective of a flourishing, prospering, maturing region.

The personal income of people living in and around the "city regions" of the West is growing far faster than the national averages. During this decade, the states of the Rockies have experienced approximately ten percent population growth, compared to six percent nationally.

It serves us well to understand where and why those gains are happening. Population and income growth are occurring in the midsize and smaller cities that are located near natural beauty: national parks, open space, rivers and lakes, state parks, recreation areas including wilderness lands.

The Rocky Mountain West has transitioned to an "amenities-economy." The irony should not be missed. Our natural resources are still leading our growth, but this time it is the unscarred landscape that provides the economic engine that is driving our significant and historically high growth.

One of the most unusual aspects of our amenities economy is that it is "footloose." That is one of the signatures of the West's transition. Footloose jobs are jobs that follow people—after two centuries of people in the West having to chase jobs—jobs in the gold and oil fields, the woods, and the copper and silver mines.

The most important points that I hope to leave with you today is that of the West's amenities economy generating footloose jobs. The growth and prosperity in this region is indisputably occurring closest to the landscape that has the most natural amenities: the parks, the mountains, rivers and lakes, and the most diverse and beautiful land on the high plains. In the entire West, much of which is represented here today, there are 80 counties with geographic centers within 40 miles of a major national park: Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado; Arizona's Grand Canyon; Capitol Reef and Arches in Utah; Yellowstone and Glacier; New Mexico's Carlsbad. People are moving in large numbers to the vicinities of natural wonders, beauty, cleanliness.

In the West, the mantra might be: "Don't build it and they will come." This is not, of course, to suggest that development, including extractive development, in the states of the Rockies should or will cease; rather it is to simply draw your attention to an important aspect of the evolving West and to suggest that future development must meet the economic imperative of respecting our land, air, and water.

As I move to my close, I ask that this committee and the Congress become more attentive to the priorities of those of us who live in the West. I believe, frankly, that for more than a decade congressional understanding of the West has been lacking and worse, congressional actions or non-actions have been detrimental to the West. This hearing may be the dawn of a new recognition and partnership—we hope so.

As you know, more than half of the land in the West is held by the federal government on behalf of all of us. That ownership of America's vast estate of open places demands stewardship balance—and right now we westerners, most of us, believe the federal government is not appropriately either finding or seeking that balance.

I'll just mention several matters that point to imbalance:

National Parks: Since Yellowstone, 135 years ago, the national parks remain America's best idea. They are world-class assets. Your own GAO estimates the park repair backlog at \$6 billion. Congress must quit starving the national parks.

LWCF: The combined funding between the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Forest Legacy Program has been slashed an astonishing 90% since George W. Bush took office—from \$600 million to around \$50 million.

Wilderness: The only two states in the country to not complete our federal wilderness designations are Idaho and Montana. We urge this committee to be attentive to those efforts.

Drought: One example—the water level at Lake Meade on the Colorado is 90 feet lower than its historic average.

Clean Water and Pipeline Safety: We are assured that, finally, long overdue attention will be paid. Chairmen Dingell and Oberstar have put both of these western problems on their committee agendas.

Renewable and Alternative Energy: Throughout virtually the life of this country, the West has provided the oil, gas, hydro and coal necessary to fuel America's needs. And we intend to continue to be helpful but we need your partnership in moving toward cleaner alternatives and renewable energy sources.

Restoration: Governor Schweitzer and I believe that a major new economy beckons in the West—restoration. Let's work on it together with this newly attentive Congress.

Native Americans: Far too many Indians still live in poverty. They have the worst housing, lowest life expectancies, and lowest income of any ethnic group in America. Please!

A final point and one that raises alarm for Montanans...

Mineral Leasing: Our state's Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks has only recently understood the breadth of mineral leasing throughout our state. In only the past three months, the BLM has leased 110,000 acres of land in Montana—both public and private land. Millions of acres of Montana have now been leased primarily for gas—often methane gas. Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks tells us that this energy development will have more negative consequences to fish and wildlife within the next ten years than has been realized during the past half century.

Yes, we can sustain our landscapes and wildlife with appropriate energy development but not with the onslaught that is now planned. And remember—once the minerals are leased under private land, the landowner must allow entry. We know that a member of this committee, Mark Udall, has offered legislative help—please consider it.

Members of this committee, a committee which has always held jurisdiction over those federal issues so important to the West, we need your immediate help to slow the virtually unrestrained onslaught of drilling rigs throughout Montana and the Rocky Mountain West. Please consider a Congressional-ordered moratorium on the headlong mineral leasing in the Rocky Mountain West. The BLM is under White House orders to lease the West before this president's term ends. Please bring balance to this chaos.

We are very pleased that you, too, recognize that in the West “the times they are a-changin’.”

Thank you for inviting me.

– End –