

**Ashley Korenblat, President Western Spirit Cycling
Outdoor Industry Association**

**Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources
Land-use Issues Associated with Onshore Oil and Gas Leasing Development
Thursday April 26, 2007, Room 1334 Longworth House Office Building
10:00 a.m. Joint Oversight Hearing**

Background

Thank you for inviting me. My name is Ashley Korenblat and I live in Moab, Utah with my husband and two year old son. I am originally from Arkansas, went to college at Dartmouth and received an MBA from the Tuck School there. After a stint on Wall Street I was hired to run a bicycle factory in Massachusetts called Merlin Metalworks. We used aerospace materials to produce what at that time many felt was the best bicycle in the world. We sold that company and now I am an outfitter on the public lands. I own a bicycle touring company which operates in 17 states. I am a former President of the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) and am currently serving on the Utah BLM Resource Advisory Council and on a task force formed by the Governor of Utah to study Outdoor Recreation Economic Ecosystems.

I have spent the last 10 years traveling through our public lands developing bike trips. My company, Western Spirit Cycling, holds permits on all types of public lands: BLM, Forest Service, and both State and National Parks.

We operate under special use permits, incidental business permits, and commercial use permits from:

The USDA Forest Service in the following National Forests:

Boise, Coronado, Dixie, Grand Mesa, Gunnison, Kaibab, Manti La Sal, San Juan, Sawtooth, Sierra Vista, Uncompahgre, Challis, Clearwater, Beaverhead-Deerlodge, Caribou-Targhee, Black Hills, Mount Hood, Umpqua, Nantahala, White Mountain, Monongahela, and Pisgah National Forests and the Dakota Prairie Grasslands.

The Bureau of Land Management in the following resource areas:

San Juan Resource Area; Henry Mountain Field Station; Moab, Arizona Strip and Grand Junction Field Offices; Grand Staircase National Monument

The National Park Service in the following National Parks:

Bryce, Zion, Capitol Reef, Grand Canyon, Crater Lake and Blue Ridge Parkway National Parks. Western Spirit is a concessionaire in Canyonlands National Park.

Our guests join us for weeklong trips into the backcountry by bicycle. And on these trips, they need rain coats and pants. They need tents and sleeping bags. They need bicycles and helmets. Our guests stay in nearby hotels and eat in local restaurants before and after

their trips, making us just one of the links in the value chain that makes up the \$730 billion outdoor industry.

Some of our trips are for the truly hearty and involve five days above 10,000 feet on the Colorado Trail, while others are quite gentle. In fact, my mother-in-law did our trip in the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument for her 70th birthday. She had not been on a bike in years. We got her a good rain coat and a warm sleeping bag and she had a wonderful time.

The Power of the Backcountry

What if every person in our country had the opportunity to spend one week a year traveling under his or her own steam through our public lands camping under the stars? I believe such a development would lead to progress on some serious problems from rising health care costs to global warming. Our public lands are an incredible resource that belong to all of us.

There are over 10,000 companies, like mine, who provide recreational opportunities on our public lands. From Barb and Harlan Opdahl at Triple O Outfitters who take people elk hunting on the Lewis and Clark trail to large river companies, like OARS, who run white water river trips on many of the major rivers throughout the US. What do all of these outfitters have in common, besides the fact that we all make people buy raincoats *and pants*? Our businesses, and the companies that make the rain gear, depend on land in its natural form.

The restorative powers of a trip to the backcountry are well known. As Theodore Roosevelt once said,

“ It is an incalculable added pleasure to anyone’s sum of happiness if he or she grows to know, even slightly and imperfectly, how to read and enjoy the wonder-book of nature.”

Companies such as the National Outdoor Leadership School and Outward Bound continue to grow and thrive because the trips these organizations provide make you a better person. There you are, a three day walk from a paved road. The wind is howling and the storm is bearing down upon you. You are nervous and unsure, because you are out here for 18 more days. But you put on your raincoat and your rain pants and you keep moving. You dig into your suitcase of courage and you make it over the pass to camp. There, you set up your tent and make a cup of tea, and then the storm blows away and you are left with a beautiful sunset.

I have seen it myself many times, people arrive for their bike trips, clean, a little pale, and nervous. There is a bit of panic associated with leaving the grid. Their cell phones will not work out there, and that worries them. Then they come back after having lived through the storm, having climbed over the pass, having swooped down the other side, having really seen the stars—and they actually look different. They are dirty, but they

are no longer nervous. They have reconnected with themselves and the earth and they have a kind of glow. More than 65% of our customers come back every year.

The proliferation of wilderness therapy programs for at-risk youth is further testimony to the power of the backcountry. The out-of-doors has the power to heal and make us stronger. Being outside in the vast landscape of our public lands is integral to the human experience.

Making a Living on our Public Lands

Many of these lands were originally set aside for resource extraction, and the idea of managing them for recreational purposes is relatively new. There are many places where resource extraction and recreation co-exist. Yet in more and more cases a choice must be made and a simple cost benefit analysis is difficult to perform. Most resource extraction has a lifespan, defined by the productive life of the mine or well, while revenues from recreation can continue and increase in perpetuity.

In addition, many long-time Westerners deeply resent the federal lands in their states. How can they make a living if 87% of their county is public land? Well, one way is to open the lands to oil and gas exploration. The county government will receive a portion of the revenues, and in some areas, where the locals have the necessary skills, they will be employed. In my direct experience, it is more likely that you will begin to see trucks with out-of-state license plates and all the hotels will be full just for those few months that the wells are being tapped. And if the boom continues, some of the local high school kids will become oil drilling experts and about the time you think your son is going to settle down, he gets a call to head to Alaska or maybe the Middle East to make some serious money, and the bust has begun.

Meanwhile, Grand County, Utah where I live, is 94% public land and that is exactly why I can make a living there. If my son chooses both he and his children could also make a living there. Our company started with bicycle trips on nearby BLM lands and in Canyonlands National Park. I have been in many meetings with county commissioners who express great interest in how our company works. Many of them have begun to see the business opportunities which recreation on our public lands can provide. The bottom line here is that land in its pristine form has long term economic value.

The Maah Daah Hey Trail in North Dakota

In 1999 a 96 mile multi-use trail was built to link both districts of Theodore Roosevelt National Park through the Little Missouri National Grasslands which are managed by the US Forest Service. The Forest Service issued a competitive prospectus for permits on the trail, and my company, Western Spirit Cycling, was awarded a permit. The state of North Dakota began a marketing campaign to promote the trail. Advertisements showing the trail snaking through the grass in and out of the badlands geology appeared in all the outdoor magazines. The International Mountain Bicycling Association gave the trail the coveted "Epic" designation. Everything was on track to put North Dakota on the map as a world class mountain bike destination.

There was only one problem, this area of the National Grasslands is an oil field with more than 250 active wells. The trail was put in around these wells, and while there are many pristine vistas, there are not many places to camp that are not in sight of the wells. In fact, there is one section of trail that goes right along a fence next to a well which bears a giant sign that says beware of poisonous gases. So my guides tell my guests that if they get a flat tire in this area, or have any other problems, do keep moving—and perhaps hold your breath until you get safely away from the area.

On top of these challenges, the current federal energy policy has resulted in a five-fold increase in applications to drill in the region. And since none of the land management agencies have any obligation to inform recreational permit holders about changes in resource extraction, we could roll into camp next week with a group of paying guests and find big trucks, big lights and a big hole in the ground. It is beginning to look like North Dakota made a bad investment. What steps need to be taken to insure that recreation and resource extraction can coexist?

The Outdoor Industry and Resource Extraction

To answer this question, we must first ask ourselves as a society, and you must ask yourselves as leaders of our society, is it absolutely necessary to recover every last drop of oil in the US? We know that oil is a finite resource. So since we must begin to transition to alternative fuels, shouldn't you, the long term stewards of our nation initiate that transition? One way to do that would be to require that outdoor recreation be considered before oil leases are awarded.

Ultimately, this is a long term versus short term question. Our public lands are the backbone of the \$730 billion dollar outdoor industry, which contributes 6.5 million jobs and more than \$88 billion in annual state and federal tax revenues. This includes bicycling, camping, fishing, hunting, paddling, snowsports, wildlife viewing, and trail running, hiking, and climbing. And there is nowhere to go but up, the outdoor industry has seen consistent growth over the past 25 years.

There are two factors contributing to this growth: increased population and increased awareness that outdoor exercise greatly contributes to both health and happiness. So, while demand is increasing, supply is dwindling. A microcosm of what the future might hold can be seen in the Grand Canyon. Demand for permits to float the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon has skyrocketed. Land managers rightly control access to the canyon to avoid damage to the fragile environment. Commercial outfitters often book all their trips for the year in a single day. Private parties have been known to wait over 10 years to receive a permit. Recently a lottery has been instituted to provide better access, but the reality is that right now, only wealthy people with flexible schedules get to float the Grand Canyon.

If we insist on extracting every drop of oil from our public lands there will be fewer and fewer places that are truly in their natural state. And the law of supply and demand will result in a situation where only the wealthiest Americans will be able to visit those spots.

Opportunities for Outdoor Recreation for all Americans

Despite my plea here today, you may look at the maps and the millions and millions of acres managed by our federal agencies and think how can a oil well, which often occupies less than a quarter acre be such a big problem. The consequences of digging the well spread well beyond its mere footprint. There are the roads that must be put in to reach it and there is the noise and there is its particular location. It is getting harder and harder to find contiguous sections of the backcountry to run an 18 day trip, or in some cases, even a 5 day trip. When people are traveling under their own steam, you can't simply change the route or just keep going to get away from the well. On an introductory bike trip, we really don't want to ride much further than 20 to 30 miles in a day. So, if a well pops up in one of our camps, we will have to change the entire route of the trip, which often is not possible. And suddenly one of the trips in my product line is gone.

USDA Forest Service

While we have long standing relationships with many of the rangers with whom we work, they have no official obligation to contact us should a lease be sold on one of our trip routes.

Bureau of Land Management

The BLM is legally required to consider wildlife, paleontology, and archaeology in both the planning and development stages of oil and gas leasing, but there is no such requirement regarding recreation.

National Park Service

While the Parks themselves are protected from actual drilling, to provide a true backcountry experience we must protect the viewshed from the park and avoid the noise.

While my testimony here has focused on permit holders on our public lands, we probably represent less than 40% of the recreation that is taking place. Americans of all types recreate on our public lands in thousands of ways. While not every land manager has perfect data regarding visitation, they are all aware of use and visitation patterns that would be interrupted by drilling.

If we continue to pursue aggressive resource extraction on the public lands without regard to increased recreational demands we will sacrifice the long term for the short term. By definition an oil well is a short term economic engine, whereas land in its pristine form can provide a living for guides and outfitters and those that make tents, and raincoats and bicycles and boats forever. **So I urge you to add language to your bill requiring all land management agencies to consider long term recreational patterns, visitation, economic benefits, and social impacts before leases are awarded.**