



Year in Review: McMorris Chairs National Environmental Policy Act Task Force

Dear Friends -

During my first year in Congress, I had the honor of being appointed by the Chairman of the Resources Committee Richard Pombo to chair a Task Force on strengthening The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). As we learned through the hearings, NEPA is a story of innovation and success; it is also one of challenges, hurdles, and barriers. We all share the goal of clean water and clean air, but we must look for ways to improve the process to increase efficiency, effectiveness, and timeliness of implementation.



Ranchers rally at a taskforce hearing in June.

The Task Force held its first hearing in Spokane last April and was I pleased to bring the Task Force to Eastern Washington to examine the impact NEPA has had on the Pacific Northwest. Throughout the next seven months the Task Force traveled to Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Virginia. Our last two hearings were held in Washington D.C.

I would like to take this opportunity to share further details about the Task Force and some of our key findings. I have learned that whether it is transportation/public works projects, managing our waterways, oil and gas development, healthy forests, mining, grazing or any other federal project, NEPA is involved.

Best Wishes,

Cathy McMorris

History of NEPA: Good intentions turn into hundreds of lawsuits

Everyone can agree that when NEPA was passed in 1970, it served a visionary and laudable goal of protecting our environment and seeking public input. Congress designed NEPA to make sure we understood the environmental impacts of major federal actions. But this vague language has led to 1,500 court cases, used sometimes simply to stall important public and private projects and too often is subject to the opinions

of judges rather than environmental scientists.

NEPA has gone 35 years without a congressional review, and it is time to see how it can be approved to ensure sound decision-making, instead of endless analysis and litigation, and protect and enhance wildlife, watersheds, and wildlands.

NEPA's Impact on the Pacific Northwest

We have heard from miners, farmers, ranchers, biologists, environmental activists, forestry workers, energy producers, environmental lawyers (over 60 people through oral testimony alone) on what works and where there is room for improvement. Here are some of our findings:

Transportation

The Task Force learned that key transportation projects have been stalled because of time and cost. The Washington State Secretary of Transportation testified that NEPA contributed to "gridlock on important decisions" despite the collection of good information and the participation of many people.

Forest Health

Vaagen Brothers Lumber in Colville testified at the Spokane hearing that preparing impact studies for NEPA delays the immediate restoration on forests following catastrophic events, like a fire or bug infestation. This leaves vast areas of national forest land barren of trees for decades, and has led to devastating impacts on wildlife habitat, soil stability and water quality.

Mining

The Coeur d'Alene Mining Company testified that preparing an environmental impact statement for a gold mining project in Alaska cost millions of dollars and took so long that the price of gold dropped and the project was never completed. The mining industry stated that they sometimes endure up to 20 years of permitting analysis.

Oil and Gas

We have heard about NEPA implications on oil and gas refining and distribution and how it impedes access to affordable, domestic energy. The average time frame for obtaining a permit to produce national gas has tripled.

Ways to Improve the NEPA Process

Numerous suggestions have been made to the Task Force on ways to improve the process. Some of these recommendations include: clearly defining "significant environmental impact;" establishing mandatory time

frames; seeking public input earlier in the process, and including environmental benefits in addition to environmental impacts for consideration in the NEPA process.

We recently held our final Task Force hearing in Washington D.C. and will now begin the process of going through all the testimony that has been collected over the past seven months. The Task Force will compile our findings into a draft report that will be presented to the full Resources Committee by the end of the year.

To learn more about the NEPA Task Force, visit <http://resourcescommittee.house.gov/nepataskforce.htm>

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