

Oral Testimony: Dominick A. DellaSala

Chairman Grijalva and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Dominick DellaSala. I am the Chief Scientist at the National Center for Conservation Science & Policy in Ashland, Oregon and President Elect of the Society for Conservation Biology, North America Section. SCB has a global membership of over 11,000 scientists and resource managers; two-thirds of whom reside in the U.S.

Throughout my written testimony I emphasize that:

The longer we delay action on climate change and the more we release dangerous greenhouse gases (GHGs) into the atmosphere, the worse the situation will become for Americans and the world.

The rapid climate change we are experiencing is the result of three things:

- 1) Human-caused releases of several gases that insulate and particles that cause heating absorption and retention, warming the earth,
- 2) The loss and degradation of forests, and pollution related changes in the oceans and the reduction in the ability of both to absorb and convert carbon dioxide to oxygen, and
- 3) Changes in ice, rainfall, water temperature, wind, and currents caused by climate change that themselves speed up the climate change process, which are called feedback loops. Major shifts in these can be tipping points that cause chain reactions in global weather patterns and other climate changes.

As a safety net for humanity, some of our most able scientists have set a target of 350 ppm CO₂¹ in the atmosphere as a mid-term safe limit – we are currently at ~387 ppm CO₂ and climbing (2 ppm per year). According to the United Nations, official disasters have increased from 200 per year to 400 per year in recent decades and 9 out of 10 are due to climate change. The further away from the 350 ppm limit we get, the more of these we will see and the more likely it is that climate change will trigger truly catastrophic events.

Depending on how you measure them, public lands cover about 20% of our nation's land base. They are strongholds for essential and irreplaceable benefits such as biodiversity, clean water, flood control, and carbon sequestration. These benefits are severely threatened by climate change and certain management activities. But these lands hold part of the climate solution as well.

I would like to emphasize 3 main points from my testimony, which includes 14 closing recommendations and 3 supporting documents.

I. The nation needs a comprehensive national goal with early and aggressive measures to reduce GHG and particulate emissions to reach a 350 ppmⁱⁱ target.

There are 2 measures that Congress, led by this Subcommittee, can require of federal agencies to contribute to a national goal --

First, this Committee should direct the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture to report on what authorities they already have under existing laws to reduce net GHGs and how they initially plan to use them.

Second, Congress and/or the Administration should convene a Committee of Scientists tasked with advising Congress and the Administration on how to best retrofit existing regulations and statutes to address cumulative causes and impacts of climate change arising from land-use.

As an example, Congress can direct federal agencies to measure the likely impact of GHGs from actions on public lands, and compare alternatives as they comply with NEPA. Alternatives can then be selected to optimize carbon sequestration and/or reduce GHG emissions. This is especially important in evaluating development of energy resources, livestock grazing, and logging on public lands.

II. The primary goal of public lands should be the protection of ecosystem services, biodiversity, and optimization of carbon storage. Federal agencies should be guided by the same consistent mission in this regard and provide the core for a network of public and private lands managed for these ecosystem services.

To illustrate how far away from this goal the agencies are, in 2008 the Bush administration rescinded the NFMA wildlife viability regulations and BLM doesn't even have a requirement to protect viable wildlife populations. Also, the BLM Western Oregon Plan Revisions (WORP) would increase old-growth logging by 400%, releasing a CO₂ equivalent of driving 1 million cars for 132 years while further stressing ecosystems.

To help public lands adapt to and mitigate against climate change, Congress should direct federal agencies to: (1) retain existing stores of carbon in mature and old forests as the nation's "carbon trust," earning annual interest on deposited carbon (2) reduce existing ecosystem stressors from land management, and (3) maintain viable wildlife populations.

Intact ecosystems like roadless areas are a key strong hold for fish and wildlife because these areas are under comparatively less stress and are most capable of withstanding and rebounding from disturbances. They should be protected as part of a climate change insurance policy.

III. Congress should revise the BLM mandate to accelerate energy development on public lands and provide guidance to both BLM and Forest Service on energy development.

The BLM recently has indicated it will allow additional oil and gas development across vast areas on top of extensive areas already leased. Congress should call for a full accounting of emissions and ecosystem degradation of already developed leases to better understand and mitigate for impacts. In light of the likely impacts of drilling, let's not make matters worse. Congress should therefore impose a moratorium on further lease development and require revocation of any leases that are incompatible with climate and biological security.

CLOSING COMMENTS

Mr. Chairman, as you and the subcommittee contemplate legislation for public lands to adapt and mitigate for climate change, we urge that public lands be managed for their irreplaceable contribution to biodiversity and ecosystem services by developing a national comprehensive plan to bring down and keep GHG emissions at safe levels, reduce our dependency on fossil fuels while developing renewable energy sources, and ensure the continuation of a biologically diverse and robust system of national forests and BLM lands.

ⁱ Correct on June 19th, 2009. Original testimony referred 350ppm equivalents. However, James Hansen's "Target atmospheric CO₂: Where should humanity aim?" paper actually calls for a 350ppm CO₂ target, not carbon equivalents.

ⁱⁱ See above