

Wild Lands Play Key Role in Fighting Climate Change, Wilderness  
Society Expert Tells House Committee  
Wilderness Society  
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TWENTYNINE PALMS, CA - Members of a congressional subcommittee took their business to this gateway community near Joshua Tree National Park for a special oversight hearing today on the role of public lands in addressing climate change. Melyssa Watson, Senior Director for Wilderness at the Wilderness Society, was among those who testified before Rep. Raúl Grijalva's (D-Ariz.) Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands. Joshua Trees namesake species is one of many on U.S. public lands threatened by global warming. Citing the farsighted leaders who established the National Park System more than a hundred years ago, Watson urged the committee to be similarly "visionary" in tackling climate change.

Watson's testimony focused on the benefits that wilderness offers, calling wilderness lands "essential in helping land managers find a path forward" in fighting the impacts of climate change. She urged committee members to continue to work for funding to help natural resources adapt to the inevitable impacts of a warming world.

By preserving wilderness, we preserve the potential to keep our water clean, keep nutrients in our soils, filter the air we breathe, and have natural carbon "sinks" that keep harmful greenhouse gases from entering the atmosphere, Watson stressed. Wilderness lands also provide a refuge from the disturbances caused by climate change. "Large, unfragmented landscapes protected as wilderness provide wildlife with 'room to roam' and refuge from areas suffering from climate-related disturbances such as drought, fire and floods."

While there is much to be done within the National Park Service and other land-management agencies, Congress must play the "vital role" of passing climate legislation that limits the emissions of greenhouse gases, makes polluters pay, and uses the revenues from pollution auction permits to pay for public benefits, Watson said. She also urged the committee to provide the dedicated annual funding land managers need to safeguard the natural systems that sustain human communities, fish and wildlife populations.

Establishing a U.S. Climate Reserve should also be a national priority, with the goal of "no net loss" of the nation's carbon sink in the coming decade, Watson said. She cautioned that "energy policy decisions and the fate of our public lands are inextricably intertwined," and urged Congress to "ensure that renewable energy is developed without impeding ecological adaptation, disrupting carbon storage, or harming important wildlife habitat on our public lands."