

**Opening Statement of Chairman Whitehouse  
Senate Committee on the Budget  
“Recreation at Risk: The Nature of Climate Costs”  
March 20, 2024**

Ranking Member Grassley, members of the committee, witnesses, and guests, welcome to our fourteenth hearing on the economic dangers associated with climate change that affect our federal budget.

Last week again, one of my colleagues across the aisle questioned this series of hearings. It’s a common Republican refrain. But if you’ve been listening, you’ve heard over and over again from highly credible witnesses about economy-wide threats from climate change. We have heard warnings from economists, scientists, medical professionals, insurance and investment executives, even a former Republican Senate Majority Leader. They warn of danger ahead.

Please remember that we are operating under an agreed budget for both this fiscal year and next. The Fiscal Responsibility Act, passed in June of last year, with support from Republicans on this Committee, set a two-year budget framework. So we have a budget, through to October of 2025. Now we need to look ahead.

If you look at our national debt, about a third of it comes from emergencies. If we’d been better prepared, the national debt would be much less. These climate hearings have focused on a huge emergency bearing down on us. The fact that the climate emergency is one that Republicans and fossil fuel polluters would prefer not to talk about doesn’t make it any less real. Facts are facts; and physics is physics.

There’s a pattern here: we offer the warnings, Republicans mock the warnings, and then the news proves the warnings true.

We held a hearing warning about sea level rise and storm impact on property values, driven by uninsurability, and we are witnessing the property insurance market circling the drain in Florida. No insurance; no mortgage. No mortgages; very hard to sell your property.

We held a hearing warning about wildfire risk, and this month the Smokehouse Creek fire in Texas—the state’s largest ever—burned more than 1.2 million acres. It killed livestock and destroyed crops, hammering Texas’ agricultural sector. With home insurance premiums were already sky high, partly from climate risk, many residents [didn’t have](#) homeowners insurance. Again: no insurance; no mortgage. No mortgages; hard to sell your property.

We held a hearing warning about supply chains’ susceptibility to climate risk, and we’re witnessing extreme drought reducing water levels in the Panama Canal so low that shipping is down nearly 40 percent from last year, pushing up prices.

Recently, Fed Chairman Jerome Powell warned that inflation is being driven by climate change driving up insurance costs. It's climate inflation.

We had a hearing on climate disasters and disaster costs, and in just the last year the United States suffered a record-breaking 28 separate billion-dollar disasters, pushing up prices and burdening the budget. These mounting disasters pose systemic risks to our economy.

Some of the economic hits from climate change are sector-specific, which brings us today to the climate-related threats to the outdoor recreation industry. Outdoor recreation is not just an essential part of American culture, it's also an important part of our economy: \$1.1 trillion in economic output and almost 5 million jobs. Each year, Americans spend hundreds of billions of dollars exploring the outdoors, hunting, fishing, hiking, skiing, camping, canoeing and sailing. A lot of family memories are made outdoors.

Communities across the country count on outdoor recreation to attract residents and visitors, creating jobs and economic development. Utah, for instance, has seen businesses locate there for its robust outdoor recreation opportunities, and employees head there for that same reason.

Winter sports have been a huge economic driver in Utah and states across the country. But climate change is wreaking havoc on communities and industries that depend on snow. Wisconsin got so little snow this year that the Small Business Administration extended disaster coverage to affected businesses. Ski areas across the country struggled to operate in warmer winters. The Teton Pass Ski Area in Montana was only open four full days this year.

Hunting seasons change as climate change forces animals into new migratory patterns. Arkansas—the “Duck Capital of the World”—has seen fewer mallards migrate through the state. The Game and Fish Commission estimates that duck hunting generates \$70 million in economic activity each year.

Warming streams and rivers jeopardize the fishing industry and the communities that rely on fishing. Montana, the unofficial fly-fishing capital of the United States, gets an estimated \$900 million a year from fishing. But warming streams and declining trout populations are threatening local shops, restaurants, guides, and lodges.

Storms also drive away tourism. 2022's torrential rains flooded Yellowstone National Park, destroying roads and closing park entrances at the height of the tourist season, depriving the local economy of the seasonal boon that usually carries them through the year.

We've spent these hearings discussing the economic dangers of climate change; it's worth also remembering the losses that can't be quantified. The fishing place your grandfather took you to where you can't take your granddaughter. Your Glacier National Park losing its glacier. The quiet on lakes that once froze over and rang with the cheerful noise of pond hockey. Once cold streams now barren of trout, near campsites ringed by dead trees, killed by bark beetle. Fish kills

and algae fouling beaches and bays. Yes, there are huge economic stakes to ignoring climate change. But there is also harm to our way of life, our traditions, our connection to the land and waters — another reason Congress must get serious about the carbon pollution that is costing us all so much.