

Hilary Hutcheson's testimony

Chairman Whitehouse, Ranking Member Grassley, and Members of the Committee,

I appreciate the opportunity to connect with you about the impacts of climate change on the outdoor recreation economy. As a full-time fly fishing guide, outfitter, and shop owner near Glacier National Park, Montana, my career is one of the 29,453 jobs directly supported by outdoor recreation in our state. [\(Citation\)](#) As the outfitter on record for the largest and longest-running commercial river company in the Northern Rockies region, with 185 employees, including 100 river guides, I feel responsible for many livelihoods beyond my own. My fellow guides are responsible for offering an excellent experience to many of the 12.5 million people who visit our state each year, spending 5.82 billion dollars. [\(Citation\)](#) More than 700,000 visitors book a guided trip through an outfit like mine every year in Montana.

Water-based activities represent the largest guided trip sectors, and guided fishing trips bring in about 80 million dollars. [\(Citation\)](#) We love our jobs. Unfortunately, our increasingly unstable river office environment, marked by drastic temperature fluctuations, wildfires, floods, droughts, wildlife stress, and other disruptions, warrants extra attention to guides' physical and mental health, something my company recognizes as an essential corporate expense. There's even a non-profit crisis hotline dedicated to professional outdoor guides in Montana and Idaho, with an increasing number of calls coming in because of environmental stressors. The cost of doing business *should* keep me on my toes, but it's my job to think about these numbers, what's driving them, and how we can work with you to keep it in balance.

Each year, more than three million people visit Glacier National Park to catch a glimpse of its diminishing glaciers and to enjoy the renowned landscape where those features are carved. The Crown of the Continent stands as one of the planet's last relatively intact ecosystems. A bucket list item for many anglers is to connect with a wild, native westslope cutthroat trout in an intact ecosystem, and I'm thrilled that this has increasingly become a value recognized by many anglers around the world.

Anglers are also increasingly aware of how human-caused climate change affects this delicate balance. Clients who spend money to come to Montana to fish with us are asking me and my fellow guides some tough, sophisticated questions about the climate. They are asking about our new normals, like unseasonable rain-on-snow events that can scour trout spawning beds. They ask about why we run out of water so early in the season. They ask why they are seeing so many weakened, hybrid trout. We are

fortunate to have some of the world's top climate scientists located in our big outdoor classroom, and we refer to their research to explain how warmer water is hospitable to non-native species that can eke out native populations. We invest in extra education for guides who are becoming accustomed to citing scientific evidence and explaining cascading ecological effects. Today guides explain why we try to keep trout in the water instead of lifting them into the boat for a photo. We explain why there are government-imposed rules, called Hoot Owl Regulations, that prohibit fishing during the hottest part of the day. [\(Citation\)](#) Even when the state has not imposed Hoot Owl Regulations, many savvy outfitters adhere to a self-imposed Hoot Owl rule. Trout mortality goes up drastically when they are caught and released in waters that are warmer than their optimal survival range. [\(Citation\)](#)

As a river-based business owner, I think about budgets all the time. It's becoming increasingly challenging to budget for the season. Will we have dangerously high water or historically low water? Should we not book guests in August, when thick smoke from wildfires might keep us off the river again? How many client trip deposits will we have to refund because of canceled vacations? How many guides should we hire, given all this uncertainty?

A recent report underscores the economic jeopardy posed by climate change, predicting the potential loss of 8,800 outdoor recreation jobs and a staggering \$263 million in labor earnings annually by mid-century in Montana alone. [\(Citation\)](#) This includes anticipated declines in visitation to iconic national parks like Glacier and Yellowstone, as well as adverse impacts on wildlife watching and hunting.

Something that helps me work through the budget concerns is my connectivity to the greater angling community in the United States. I'm able to swap grievances and share best practices with my fishing colleagues across the country, in Florida, Maine, Texas, Oregon, and Alaska who are dealing with equally distressing environmental challenges in their fisheries.

Professional anglers have a unique perspective on the far-reaching impacts of climate change. In all pockets of the country, anglers, angling businesses, and the broader outdoor economy are painfully impacted by the deterioration of our fisheries. Through active participation in national industry associations, non-profits, and partnerships with sustainability-focused brands, we echo and amplify the urgent pleas of our communities to our congressional leadership. [\(Citation\)](#)

I am encouraged by the historic ability of the federal government to listen to outdoors people who are the voice of the river. Specifically, I'm fueled every day by the enactment of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 which offers appropriate levels of federal protection to my cherished home waters. This legislation not only safeguards our rivers from development but also fosters economic vitality by recognizing unique rivers' outstandingly remarkable values. I am profoundly grateful for the bipartisan river management that transcends political boundaries, fostering public participation in developing goals for river protection. [\(Citation\)](#)

As guides, we are constantly told that we have the best job in the world. We are in the perfect place, having perfect adventures. So, it can feel weird to point out that it's not perfect. But all three of my adult children have jobs in outdoor rec. They have been dealing with the impacts of climate change their whole lives. Standing up for rivers is a thread woven through our family structure.

So, for my kids who became my coworkers, for the river professionals who are among the finest humans on Earth, for our guests...and in the face of these environmental challenges, I implore our leaders to prioritize decisive action on climate change. The future of our environment, economy, and community is a package deal. And it is directly connected to our collective efforts to safeguard our planet for generations to come.

Thank you for your attention, and I welcome your questions.