

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT AMERICA'S GREAT OUTDOORS CONFERENCE

Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C.

10:17 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, everybody. Thank you so much. Thank you. Please, everybody have a seat. Thank you.

It is a great privilege to join [you] for this conference on America's Great Outdoors. There are a number of people that obviously I want to acknowledge here who have worked tirelessly to move this agenda forward. At the top of our list, our Secretary of the Interior -- who I believe is going to be one of the best Secretaries of Interior in American history -- Ken Salazar, who has just fully embraced this issue, we're thrilled with the work he's done. Thank you. Thank you, Ken. (Applause.)

Secretary Tom Vilsack, Administrator Lisa Jackson, Nancy Sutley -- all have been part of what we call our "green team," and are consistently providing creative ideas to make sure that we understand that conservation is not contrary to economic growth, it is an integral part of economic growth. And they have just done a fabulous job on that so please give them a big round of applause. (Applause.)

We have my outstanding NOAA Administrator, Dr. Jane Lubchenco. We have Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, Jo-Ellen Darcy. Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Installations and the Environment, Dr. Dorothy Robyn. And in the audience, if I'm not mistaken, we've got some luminaries. Is Governor Bill Richardson in the house? There he is -- from New Mexico, a great conservationist. (Applause.) Former Secretary of the Interior, Secretary Bruce Babbitt is here. (Applause.) One of the finest young mayors in the country, Mayor Cory Booker. (Applause.) And to all the outstanding members of Congress who have been so diligent in promoting a conservation agenda.

Now, I am mindful that the first such conference was held over one century ago by one of my favorite Presidents, one of our greatest Presidents -- and certainly our greatest conservation President. Upon taking office, Theodore Roosevelt -- avid birdwatcher, bear hunter -- set out on a tour of the American West that would change his life and the life of a nation forever.

He stood in awe of the geysers at Yellowstone. He camped in a snow blizzard at Yosemite. He stood on the lip of the Grand Canyon. "The ages have been at work on it," he declared. "Man can only mar it."

And from that sense of commitment sprang five national parks, 18 national monuments, 51 federal bird reservations, and 150 national forests. From that commitment sprang an effort to save the great Redwoods of California and the Petrified Forest of Arizona, the great bird rocks of the Aleutian Islands and the Tongass of Alaska. From that commitment sprang a breathtaking legacy of conservation that still enhances our lives.

Now, that legacy is an extraordinary achievement -- and no matter how long I have the privilege of serving as President, I know I can never match it. And I will probably never shoot a bear. (Laughter.) That's a fair bet there, fair guess. (Laughter.) But I do intend to enrich that legacy, and I feel an abiding bond with the land that is the United States of America.

I do, for the same reasons that all of you do; for the same reason families go outside for a picnic or campers spend a night in a national park, and sportsmen track game through the woods or wade deep into a river. It's a recognition passed down from one generation to the next, that few pursuits are more satisfying to the spirit than discovering the greatness of America's outdoors.

And when we see America's land, we understand what an incredible bounty that we have been given. And it's our obligation to make sure that the next generation enjoys that same bounty.

That recognition has been a touchstone of this presidency thanks to the outstanding leadership of Ken Salazar and Secretary Vilsack and Lisa Jackson and Nancy Sutley. They have done extraordinary work.

Last year, I signed into law a public lands bill -- the most significant in decades -- that designated 2 million acres of wilderness, over 1,000 miles of wild and scenic rivers, and three national parks. We better protected cherished places like Oregon's Mount Hood. We're taking a new approach to our National Forests to make sure they're not just providing timber for lumber companies, but water and jobs for rural communities. We are restoring our rivers and coasts, from the Chesapeake Bay to the Gulf Coast, from the Great Lakes to the Everglades.

So, yes, we are working faithfully to carry on the legacy of Teddy Roosevelt in the 21st century. But we also know that we must adapt our strategies to meet the new challenges of our time. Over the last century, our population grew from about 90 million to 300 million people, and as it did, we lost more and more of our natural landscape to development. Meanwhile, a host of other factors -- from a changing

climate to new sources of pollution -- have put a growing strain on our wildlife and our waters and our lands.

So rising to meet these challenges is a task and an obligation, but it's one that government cannot and should not meet alone. There are roughly 1,600 privately run land trusts in this country that have protected over 10 million acres through voluntary efforts. And by working with farmers and ranchers and landowners, the Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program has protected over 30 million acres, and its Natural Resource Conservation Service -- a service that is 75 years old this year -- has protected almost 3 million more. So together, we are conserving our working lands in a way that preserves the environment and protects local communities.

And that's the kind of collaborative spirit at the heart of the America's Great Outdoors Initiative that we're launching today. In the months ahead, members of this administration will host regional listening sessions across America. We'll meet with everybody -- from tribal leaders to farmers, from young people to businesspeople, from elected officials to recreation and conservation groups. And their ideas will help us form a 21st century strategy for America's great outdoors to better protect our natural landscape and our history for generations to come.

Understand, we're not talking about a big federal agenda being driven out of Washington. We're talking about how we can collect best ideas on conservation; how we can pursue good ideas that local communities embrace; and how we can be more responsible stewards of tax dollars to promote conservation.

First, we're going to build on successful conservation efforts being spearheaded outside of Washington -- by local and state governments, by tribes, and by private groups -- so we can write a new chapter in the protection of rivers, wildlife habitats, historic sites, and the great landscapes of our country.

Secondly, we're going to help farmers, ranchers, property owners who want to protect their lands for their children and their grandchildren.

Third, we'll help families spend more time outdoors, building on what the First Lady has done through the "Let's Move" initiative to encourage young people to hike and bike and get outside more often.

And fourth, we want to foster a new generation of community and urban parks so that children across America have the chance to experience places like Millennium Park in my own Chicago.

We're launching this strategy because it's the right thing to do -- because, as TR said, we must not mar the work of the ages. But we're also doing it because it's the right thing to do for our economy. It's how we're going to spur job creation in the tourism

industry and the recreation industry. It's how we'll create jobs preserving and maintaining our forests, our rivers, our great outdoors.

In a time of great difficulty, when we are recovering from the worst recession in generations, and waging two wars abroad, some may ask whether now is the time to reaffirm our commitment to our national heritage. But I want everybody to recall, it was in the midst of civil war that Abraham Lincoln set aside lands that are now Yosemite. It was in midst of a great depression that FDR formed the Civilian Conservation Corps that built the trails and campgrounds and parks we enjoy today.

Even in times of crisis, we're called to take the long view to preserve our national heritage -- because in doing so we fulfill one of the responsibilities that falls to all of us as Americans, and as inhabitants of this same small planet. And that is the responsibility that we are rising to meet today.

So thank you all for the outstanding work that you're doing individually. I look forward to the work that you're going to be doing collectively and advising this administration. Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

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10:28 A.M. EDT