Secretary Jewell Offers Vision for Conservation, Balanced Development, Youth Engagement in National Press Club Speech

WASHINGTON, D.C. – In remarks today at the National Press Club, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell laid out a strong agenda to strengthen our economy and ensure that we pass along our nation’s rich conservation legacy to the next generation – a path forward that includes balanced development and engaging and employing youth on our public lands.

“President Obama believes that we have a moral obligation to the next generation to leave our land, water, and wildlife better than we found it,” Jewell said. “Passing along the blessings that we have inherited will take action and a commitment to take the long view, particularly in this era when our lands and waters are facing unprecedented challenges from climate change and a growing population.”

In the wake of the government shutdown, Jewell underscored the real need for Congressional action to support our national parks, refuges, rivers and conservation lands, including mandatory, full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund by 2015.

“Protecting the special places that communities care about most and passing sustainable budgets that support our public lands are the kind of commonsense, bipartisan actions that Americans want to see Congress take – but we cannot and will not hold our breath forever,” said Jewell. “We owe it to future generations to act, and President Obama is ready and willing to step up where Congress falls short.”

As part of Interior’s efforts to encourage balanced development and ensure landscape-level planning, Secretary Jewell today issued her first Secretarial Order, which calls for a Department-wide mitigation strategy. The Order will ensure consistency and efficiency in the review and
permitting of new energy and other infrastructure development projects, while also providing for the conservation, adaptation and restoration of our nation’s valuable and natural and cultural resources. A copy of the Order is available here.

“This Order will help Interior create a simpler, more straightforward approach for businesses to be good partners and good stewards of our public lands,” said Jewell. “Today we have an unprecedented opportunity – using science and technology to create a better understanding of landscapes than ever before – to advance important conservation goals and achieve our development objectives. We know it doesn’t have to be an either-or.”

Jewell also laid out ambitious goals to engage the next generation through education, employment and volunteer opportunities on public lands. Specifically, by 2017, Interior will work to: develop or enhance partnerships in 50 cities to create opportunities for outdoor recreation for more than ten million young people; provide educational opportunities to at least ten million of the nation’s K through 12 students annually; engage one million volunteers in support of public lands, effectively tripling the numbers we have now; and provide 100,000 work and training opportunities to young people.

“For the health of our economy and our public lands, it’s critical that we work now to establish meaningful and deep connections between young people – from every background and every community – and the great outdoors,” said Jewell. “There’s no doubt that these goals are ambitious. That’s why we’re going to work with schools, private and non-profit partners and communities to leverage resources to help turn this vision into a reality.”
Secretary Jewell’s remarks:

Remarks at the National Press Club Speech
Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell
October 31, 2013
Washington, D.C.

As prepared for delivery:

Thank you, Tommy, and thank you for hosting me at the National Press Club. It’s an honor to be here.

I have a broad portfolio at Interior, and I’m not going to try to cover it all in my remarks; my focus today is on the Administration’s conservation agenda.

As Tommy mentioned in the introduction, I’ve been in the private sector for about 35 years – first as a petroleum engineer, then in commercial banking with an early focus on natural resources, and for the last 13 years as a retailer at REI – a $2 billion company representing a small part of a $646 billion outdoor recreation industry that supports customers who love America’s great outdoors.

I took this job enthusiastically – recognizing that there is truly no higher calling than public service. At Interior, we have the opportunity to make a difference on some of the defining issues of our time: addressing climate change, moving our country toward energy independence, honoring our nation’s proud conservation legacy; and fulfilling our sacred trust and treaty obligations to tribes. I want to thank President Obama for his nomination and confidence in me to serve as his Secretary of the Interior.

My timing, however, could have been better. I took the reins at Interior just as Washington descended into a new low – continuing resolutions to fund government since 2012, sequestration that hit just as I was starting in April, requiring 5 percent cuts across the board, and most recently, a 16-day, absurd, wasteful government shutdown.

For more than two weeks, employees had to stay home from the jobs they love. USGS hit pause on important scientific research. The BLM halted permitting for energy projects. And Indian Affairs couldn’t provide critical support to tribal nations.

Perhaps the most visible impact of the shutdown was the shuttering of our national parks, wildlife refuges and other public lands.

Imagine, for a minute, being the national park ranger who had to tell the bride to find another location for wedding that upcoming weekend. Or the Fish and Wildlife Service employee who had to turn away hunters at the start of hunting season, hunters who had waited years to get a coveted tag. Public servants were forced to do the opposite of what they are trained and love to do: welcome visitors to our public lands.
The shutdown also had a huge economic impact on the local businesses and gateway communities that rely on public lands for their bread and butter.

In a visit to Shenandoah National Park last weekend, I talked to a concessionaire who estimates the business lost $2 million in revenue from the closure in that park alone – revenue that can’t be made up.

All told, we estimate that the closure of the National Park System alone cost local communities at least $76 million per day in total visitor spending.

But if there’s a silver lining to all of this, it’s that the shutdown shined a spotlight on just how much Americans love and value their public lands and the people who serve them.

To quote a well-known line from a Joni Mitchell song, “You don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone.”

The shutdown clarified what’s at stake. It reminded us that our parks, our wildlife refuges and our public lands are uniquely ours, uniquely American.

They are the places we go with our families to recreate, to seek beauty or to find solitude. They are our watersheds, our wildlife habitat, and our economic engines. They are our sources of pride and history; they’re where our diverse stories are celebrated.

This reminder about the value of public lands has come at an important time in our history.

We are at the doorstep of the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service. In 2016, we’ll celebrate what has been called “America’s Best Idea,” – the democratic concept that, for the first time in human history, land would be set aside not for kings or for the very rich, but for everyone.

And next year will be the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, a historic, bipartisan law that has resulted in millions of acres protected for the benefit of current and future generations of Americans.

At the same time, demands on our lands and waters are greater than ever, thanks to growing populations, the very real effects of climate change, and constrained fiscal resources.

So as we stand at this juncture, it’s important to think about what conservation legacy we will leave for the next 50 years, for the next 100 years.

Will it be the legacy of short-sighted funding and partisan gridlock that we are witnessing in Congress?

I’m thinking, in particular, about some members of the House of Representatives who plan to slash funding for the national parks by 13 percent; or to gut the Fish and Wildlife Service by nearly a third; or to cut $90 million from the Bureau of Land Management’s operating budget,
which is already at a barebones level.

I’m thinking about a Congress that, since 2010, hasn’t acted to protect a single new acre of public land as a national park or a wilderness area.

Or, will it be a legacy of people like Jim and Carol Faulstich? These ranchers in South Dakota are heading up an effective partnership with other private landowners to protect the Prairie Pothole region, key habitat for our nation’s ducks and other waterfowl.

Or like Lefty Durando in Florida. Lefty is working with his fellow landowners to conserve working lands in the headwaters of the Everglades, an effort that will protect water quality and Lefty’s ranching heritage.

Or like the dozens of states and local communities around the country that, year after year, pass strong measures to fund open spaces and build new parks.

I know where President Obama stands.

The President believes that we have a moral obligation to the next generation to leave our land, water, and wildlife better than we found it. That’s why he launched the America’s Great Outdoors program in 2010. That’s why he’s taking comprehensive action to cut carbon pollution and to slow the effects of climate change. And that’s why he has used his authority time and time again to protect some of the places that Americans love most.

In my conversations with the President, he has told me how his visits to national parks and seashores with his mom and grandmother shaped him as a young man. And how he’s shared that same experience with his daughters at the rim of the Grand Canyon - a place that was set aside for future generations, even as our nation was growing by leaps and bounds.

In remarks last year, President Obama invoked Aldo Leopold as he reminded us that conservation is “not just about doing nothing; it’s about doing something affirmative to make sure that we are passing on this incredible blessing that we have.”

I look forward to working with the President, my colleagues in the Cabinet, Congress and local communities across the country to do exactly that – pass along this incredible blessing to the next generation. Accomplishing this goal takes action, particularly in this era when our land and water resources are facing unprecedented challenges.

As a start, Congress should get back to regular order and pass the President’s budget. There are members in both the House and Senate who understand that a budget that supports our parks, forests, refuges, rivers and conservation lands is also one that strengthens our economy.

The real test of whether you support conservation is not what you say in a press conference when the cameras are rolling, but whether you fight for it in the budget conference.

Congress also needs to fulfill the promise made to the American people through the Land and
rather than zeroing out the fund, as some have proposed to do, Congress should adopt President Obama’s budget proposal to enact mandatory, full-funding of LWCF by 2015.

LWCF – an innovative program that, since 1964, has used revenues from offshore oil and gas development to enhance parks and open spaces in every county across the country – has been one of our nation’s most effective tools for expanding access for hunting and fishing, creating ball-fields and other places for kids to play and learn, and protecting Civil War battlefields.

And finally, Congress needs to get moving to pass the dozens of locally-supported bills – introduced by both Republicans and Democrats – that protect the places that Americans care about most.

We need a comprehensive public lands package that conserves our nation’s most special lands and waters – just like the one that President Obama signed into law in 2009 that protected more than 2 million acres of wilderness, designated more than 1,100 miles of wild and scenic rivers, expanded the national park system and established several new national conservation areas.

Those are the kind of commonsense, bipartisan actions that Americans want to see Congress take – but we cannot and will not hold our breath forever.

We owe it to future generations to act. As he has already demonstrated, President Obama is ready and willing to step up where Congress falls short.

The nine national monuments that he has established over the past four years provide important protections for special places – like the Rio Grande del Norte in northern New Mexico – and they preserve key chapters in our nation’s story – like that of Cesar Chavez and Harriet Tubman.

There are more special places that need protection, and more stories that should be told.

In the coming weeks and months, I will be meeting with communities and evaluating opportunities where action can ensure that our nation’s stories and landscapes are honored, celebrated and preserved for the generations to come.

The next topic I want to cover deals with what some see as a fundamental issue for Interior as a land manager: how we balance the inherent tensions that can exist with development and conservation. Part of the answer is encouraging development in the right ways and in the right places.

Part of the answer is recognizing that there are some places that are too special to develop.

Today we have an unprecedented opportunity – using science and technology to create a better understanding of landscapes than ever before – to advance important conservation goals and achieve our development objectives. We know it doesn’t have to be an either-or.
We are already seeing this landscape-level approach work as we seek to meet President Obama’s goal of approving 20,000 megawatts of renewable energy on public lands by 2020 – a goal toward which my predecessor, Ken Salazar, made huge strides.

For example, in California, we’re working with the state on a plan to help site renewable energy. The Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan will blend science and satellite data to identify areas of high energy potential and high-priority conservation lands in the Mojave Desert.

In Alaska, we took a comprehensive look at the National Petroleum Reserve to protect more than 13 million acres – like key caribou habitat around Teshekpuk Lake – while making available for development more than 72 percent of the estimated economically recoverable oil.

This type of smart, balanced approach to development is especially what we need as we explore new frontiers in the Arctic, as we implement onshore leasing reforms, or as we experience an energy boom in the Bakken Region in North Dakota.

Under my leadership at Interior, we will always take the long view. And we will always, always keep in mind that public lands are a trust, one that we manage for generations to come.

That’s why today I am issuing my first Secretarial Order to ensure that whenever our public lands or resources are impacted by development activity, that we are also considering how to mitigate those impacts at a landscape level through strategic conservation and restoration.

This Secretarial Order is about good government. It will help Interior create a simpler, more straightforward approach for businesses to be good partners and good stewards of our public lands. Project proponents will be able to invest with certainty and clarity in their projects and support the region’s environmental needs, rather than ad-hoc, project-by-project mitigation efforts.

And by guiding development to the areas of highest resource value and lowest environmental concern, we can reduce the likelihood of conflict and costly delays.

I’m confident that this landscape level approach to mitigation will strike the right balance for development and conservation to ensure that we serve our nation’s needs both now and far into the future.

My last point for today – one I can’t stress enough when it comes to conservation – is the importance of engaging the next generation in understanding and stewarding our public lands.

The Millennial Generation – now young adults aged 18-33 – is larger, more urban and more diverse than any generation in our history.

Research shows that this generation cares about the planet and wants to make a difference in their careers, yet they have grown up more disconnected from the natural world than ever before.

Already outnumbering the Boomers by three million, these individuals will soon be our nation’s
elected officials, business leaders, parents and public servants.

But what happens when a generation who has little connection to our nation’s public lands is suddenly in charge of taking care of them?

At Interior, this is a very real question. With about a third of our 70,000 person workforce eligible to retire within five years, we will need a new generation of wildlife biologists, park rangers, scientists and other professionals to care for our lands and waters.

Unfortunately, the entry level jobs – like seasonal rangers, interns, trail crews, research assistants and the like – have been severely impacted by the indiscriminate nature of sequestration and limited resources. This is happening at a time when many of these young people are entering the workforce.

For the health of our economy and our public lands, it’s critical that we work now to establish meaningful and deep connections between young people – from every background and every community – and the great outdoors.

Today, I’m pleased to announce an ambitious initiative at Interior that we’ll undertake to inspire millions of young people to play, learn, serve and work outdoors.

First, we are going to develop or enhance partnerships in 50 cities to create opportunities for outdoor recreation for more than ten million young people by 2017. With nearly 80 percent of our population living in cities – places where open spaces are few and far between – expanding our urban parks and partnerships is critical.

Second, we’re going to use the nation’s best natural classrooms – our public lands – to provide educational opportunities to at least ten million of the nation’s K through 12 students annually.

Third, we are setting a goal of engaging one million volunteers in support of public lands by 2017, effectively tripling the numbers we have now. Having served on many trail crews, I know that volunteering can establish a life-long connection to our natural resources.

By ramping up the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps, Interior, USDA and other agencies in the federal family will work with Americorps, the Student Conservation Association, and other groups across the country to give many more young people and veterans these inspirational opportunities.

And finally, to develop the next generation of stewards of our public lands and our own skilled and diverse workforce, Interior and other federal land management agencies will provide 100,000 work and training opportunities to young people over the next four years.

There’s no doubt that these goals are ambitious – especially in these tight budget times.

In order to make these happen, we are going to prioritize our budgets, build off successful programs and work in partnership with schools, non-profit organizations and communities to
leverage existing resources.

We will also work with corporate and non-profit organizations to raise an additional $20 million over four years to support these youth work and training opportunities.

From my experience in the private sector, I know that there are many organizations and individuals that want to see our lands protected and the next generation engaged. We will work together to make these goals a reality.

In closing, we're continuing to move ahead in fulfilling our mission at the Interior Department. As stewards of our public lands, waters and wildlife; in partnership with tribal nations, states, and stakeholders, we will meet the needs of the present generation without sacrificing the rich legacy we pass on to our children and grandchildren. This is our commitment to all Americans and my personal commitment to you.

It is no different than the promise made by Teddy Roosevelt over a century ago, as he described what he called, "a great moral issue."

He said:

“I recognize the right and duty of this generation to develop and use the natural resources of our land but I do not recognize the right to waste them, or to rob, by wasteful use, the generations that come after us.... “Of all the questions which can come before this nation, short of the actual preservation of its existence in a great war, there is none which compares in importance with the great central task of leaving this land even a better land for our descendants than it is for us, and training them into a better race to inhabit the land and pass it on. Conservation is a great moral issue, for it involves the patriotic duty of insuring the safety and continuance of the nation.”

As we look to the next 100 years of this nation, to the next century of the national park system, or the next five decades of the Wilderness Act – these words from Roosevelt should serve as both a call to action and inspiration for all of us.

Thank you.