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AND GENERAL GOVERNMENT

March 1, 2018

The Honorable Ryan Zinke, Secretary  
US Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street, N.W.  
Washington DC 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke,

I am writing to you on behalf of a constituency that you know very well—our rural communities. Without your assistance, two rural counties in my district, Pacific and Wahkiakum, are threatened with severe economic risk. While I do not believe it is the intent of the agency to economically ruin these counties, it is very likely to be the outcome of the Long Term Conservation Strategy (LCTS) standards that are being required by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for the Marbled Murrelet. In spite of 583,000 acres of state trust land that have previously been set aside from any possible timber harvests to protect the species, the USFWS is requiring additional set asides for the Habitat Conservation Plan that is being developed by the Washington Department of Natural Resources. Prohibiting any potential timber management on an additional 37,000 acres of land that is in trust for our counties and schools will jeopardize their ability to provide even vital services to their residents.

A closer examination of the math used by USFWS, and comparing the small fraction of the Murrelet population in Southwest Washington to the large swaths of land that would be locked away, reveals the tragic absurdity of this plan. As you know, rangewide ninety-one percent of the Murrelets are located in Alaska. Less than two percent of the Murrelets are found south of Canada, at the extreme edge of its natural range. Of that small number, the vast majority (ninety percent) are found in the heavily populated Puget Sound area.

According to briefings provided to my office by the USFWS, the primary decline in Murrelet numbers is taking place in Puget Sound. That makes perfect sense given that the Murrelet is primarily found there and spends more than 90% of its life cycle at sea. What makes far less sense is the decision by the agency to focus the LCTS completely on the Murrelet's nesting habitat, with huge impacts to the rural communities I represent, but none on the marine environment farther north where the bird spends nearly its entire life. Given the numbers provided by the USFWS, only 0.44% of the Murrelets are found south of Puget Sound, yet it is those rural communities who will be forced to inordinately bear the burden of conserving the entire species.

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Equally disturbing is the USFWS decision to declare the Murrelets that are outside of Alaska as two additional Distinct Population Segments in the first place. As you know, the Murrelet species is not threatened and is in fact healthy in Alaska. Subsequently, it is troubling that the justification for the agency's decision is based solely on an international border, not on any genetically distinct differences within the species.

The decision by the agency to jeopardize the economic foundation of Pacific and Wahkiakum counties while essentially ignoring the Puget Sound – with all of its wealth and influence -- and that region's impact on the species begs the question: are the agency's decisions regarding the Murrelet based on science, or politics?

Secretary Zinke, I am asking you to step in on behalf of these counties and to work toward a conservation solution for the Marbled Murrelet that is both just and scientifically sound. The voice of our rural residents has been drowned out by those who attack their way of life, but I'll continue to speak on their behalf. I hope you will join me.

Thank you for your assistance. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Jaime Herrera Beutler WA-03  
Member of Congress