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Chairman Hastings Statement at Conference Committee Meeting on Highway Bill

WASHINGTON, D.C. – House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Doc Hastings (WA-04) delivered the following opening statement today at the Conference Committee meeting on the Highway bill:

“The federal government’s slow, cumbersome bureaucracy is consistently getting in the way of job creation and economic growth. Nowhere is this more evident than infrastructure and energy projects, where burdensome red tape and duplicative federal programs hamstring the ability to approve projects and get Americans working.

For this conference report to be considered a success, meaningful reforms need to be made to streamline government inefficiencies for infrastructure projects. Similarly, approving the Keystone Pipeline is an opportunity to address high gasoline prices, put American to work and reduce America’s dependence on unfriendly Middle Eastern oil. While the President has repeatedly refused to act, Congress must.

From the perspective of the Natural Resources Committee, one of the most important ongoing challenges is to reduce overlapping, duplicative, and costly environmental paperwork and regulatory requirements. Streamlining environmental reviews will allow proposed projects to move forward in a smarter and more efficient manner. To be blunt: it’s cheaper and faster to build a road if the federal government stops requiring more miles of paperwork than the actual asphalt used to build the road. On this point, the streamlining reforms prepared by Chairman Mica are clearly superior to the Senate bill.

At the last minute, the Senate added several other unrelated pieces of legislation to its version of the highway bill, including a number under the jurisdiction of the House Natural Resources Committee.

Among these are one-year extensions of the Payment-In-Lieu-of-Taxes and the Secure Rural Schools programs. Congress absolutely needs to act to address both of these, but it’s also important to recognize that one-year extensions alone are not true fixes, and the affected rural communities deserve much more from this Congress.

The Senate added what is commonly referred to as the RESTORE Act, which would direct funds to Gulf states affected by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, but also creates broad new federal spending programs. The Natural Resources Committee has spent more time and

energy on matters affecting the Gulf states region than any other Committee in the Congress. I am certainly sympathetic to the impacts the spill had on Gulf States, but I'm not sympathetic to the notion that an effort to provide support directly to Gulf States requires ballooning the federal bureaucracy with permanent new federal spending programs.

There is also a Senate provision to establish a new 'National Endowment for the Oceans,' which is a clear attempt to provide some legal authorization and a permanent funding stream for President Obama's Executive Order on ocean zoning. This provision is totally unrelated to the highway bill and should be kept separate and apart from the highway discussions.

Lastly, it was particularly egregious for the Senate to pile the highway bill up with \$1.4 billion in new, automatic spending over the next two years to buy more land across the nation through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, or LWCF. The mandatory buying of more land under LWCF is a fiscal dereliction of duty – especially since the government can't afford to maintain the lands it already owns. The maintenance backlog on America's federal lands registers in the multiple billions of dollars. Congress should be addressing this backlog, not adding to it.

Furthermore, while LWCF doesn't expire until late 2015, the Senate highway bill would extend it for an additional 7 years to 2022. The Senate's proposed highway bill doesn't even extend transportation funding for as long as LWCF is currently authorized.

Ironically, under the law, LWCF funds come from offshore drilling revenue, yet in mandating over a billion dollars in new, automatic LWCF spending, the Senate in this bill and as a body during this entire Congress has done absolutely nothing to expand offshore drilling or open new areas to oil and natural gas drilling.

LWCF is unrelated to the RESTORE Act and totally unrelated to the highway bill. With nearly three years to go until LWCF expires, and the fact that not one Committee hearing in either Chamber has even been held on renewing LWCF, there is more than ample time to consider this topic. It should not be blindly reauthorized in this conference report.”

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