



The Fight to Save Winter: Pro Athletes for Climate Action

September 12, 2019

Senator Brian Schatz, Chair
Opening statement (as prepared)

Good morning; I would like to call the committee to order and welcome everyone to today's hearing, where we will hear from professional athletes who are advocating for climate action.

This committee was envisioned, in large part, as a forum for highlighting the experiences of diverse groups at the front lines of the climate crisis. And traditionally when we think about climate activists, we might think about conservationists. We might think about the people who have dedicated their lives to protecting the environment. Or we might think about the people who live along the coasts. But the truth is climate change is hurting everyone. It's hurting every community and every industry, including the outdoor recreation industry and the often small, rural towns it supports.

The Fourth National Climate Assessment found that "increasing air temperatures have substantially reduced the fraction of winter precipitation falling as snow, particularly over the western United States," and recent research suggests the U.S. snow season has shortened by 34 days since the 1980s.

As our winters shorten and snowfall continues to decrease, the United States' \$20 billion snow sports tourism industry faces an uncertain future. That is a sobering prospect for an industry that contributes nearly 200,000 jobs and \$7 billion in wages to our economy. Season lengths at ski areas are projected to decline by more than 50 percent by 2050 in some locations. One study found that only half of the ski resorts in the Northeast United States will be economically viable by that point.

But for mountain communities across the United States, and the world-class athletes who have dedicated their lives to outdoor sports, the financial figures don't fully capture what is at stake.

Climate change threatens not only to disrupt an important industry; it threatens an identity and a way of life for countless athletes and communities, just as rising sea levels and warming oceans threaten Hawai'i.

But above all, disappearing winters underscore the all-encompassing nature of our climate crisis. We are not just talking about conservation areas, or habitats, or wetlands; the fact that some of our mountains will simply not have snow in the winter is a shocking thing to consider. Basic assumptions about our daily life and the things we feel passionate about in our physical surroundings will have to be reevaluated in light of climate change.

We are focused on winter sports today because these athletes are among the first to experience the tangible impacts of climate change upon their sports. But all athletes will eventually have to contend with the climate crisis. Extreme heat is already a significant concern for the organizers of the 2020 Summer Olympics and the 2022 soccer World Cup, and rising temperatures are threatening the health of athletes at every level—from runners and tennis players, to football and soccer players.

The climate crisis isn't something we will experience in the distant future. It is happening as we speak, and the athletes here today are seeing it firsthand. But as temperatures rise and snow cover decreases, they have opted to fight for climate action and, by extension, for the future of their livelihoods and the winter sports industry as we know it. The enormity of this crisis presents an opportunity for us to broaden our coalition and envision a scenario in which everyone plays a role in climate action.

This committee looks forward to hearing our witnesses' firsthand experiences and insights into how the outdoor sports community can mobilize to demand climate action. I'd like to welcome:

1. Mike Richter, a Hall of Fame goaltender for the New York Rangers and the president of Brightcore Energy;
2. Jeremy Jones, a professional snowboarder and the founder of Protect Our Winters;
3. Caroline Gleich, a professional ski mountaineer and adventurer who advocates for social and environmental causes;
4. and Tommy Caldwell, a professional rock climber who has established some of the hardest routes in the country.

Thank you for taking the time to be here and share your testimony with us. We are looking forward to hearing your experiences and your views on how we can ensure your sports continue to thrive for future generations. We'll begin by hearing testimony from each of the witnesses going down the line, starting with Mr. Richter.