

**Testimony of the Honorable Terrence D. Wolf
Chairman, Washakie County Board of County Commissioners and;
Past President, Wyoming County Commissioners Association**

**United States Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works Hearing on
“Flood Control Infrastructure: Safety Questions Raised by Current Events”
March 1, 2017**

Good morning Chairman Barrasso, Ranking Member Carper, and distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about a very local flood control challenge my small community has faced over the last several years.

My name is Terry Wolf, I am the Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners in Washakie County, Wyoming. Washakie County is located in rural northwest Wyoming, and with annual revenue of only \$8 million it is the third poorest county in Wyoming. Washakie is one of four counties in the Big Horn Basin. It is a semi-arid basin nestled between mountain ranges that is prime agricultural land. This area of Wyoming is well known for its sugar beets that are grown and processed into pure, U.S. made sugar for consumption. The high yield of agricultural production is dependent upon the Big Horn River that flows south to north out of Wind River Canyon through our basin.

Unfortunately, this same river that brings so much life also brings destruction to our communities in the spring when ice blocks the size of trucks and weighing up to 300,000 pounds jam up and block the flow of the river. The ice jams push the water over the banks and into the communities of Worland, Manderson, Basin, and Greybull, flooding homes and businesses and threatening the sugar processing plant I’ve already mentioned.

Mr. Chairman, I want to direct your attention to Appendix B at the end of my written testimony. Appendix B shows before and after photos of the flooding that occurred in Worland on February 11th of this year. In the before photos you can see in the foreground an island in the middle of the river that has formed from sediment buildup over the course of years. In the after photos you get a clear picture of the ice blocks creating a dam at that island and causing the flooding. There is a fantastic high definition drone video available here of the flood as it is occurring at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZK9OaoVR6nY>.

Over the course of the week city, county, and state officials, the Wyoming National Guard, and numerous volunteers worked tirelessly to protect public and private property. Critical infrastructure threatened by the flood includes US Hwy 20, BNSF railroad, and critical energy and communications infrastructure. We are still evaluating the total costs to our communities in damage and clean-up costs, but estimates of state and local costs will likely exceed \$150,000.

While this flood is heartbreaking by itself, what is important for the Committee to know is that what happened in Worland a couple weeks ago is almost identical to the flooding in 2014. That same island gathered and held ice blocks and pushed the Big Horn River into Worland costing state and local governments nearly \$200,000 in recovery costs. For a rural county like Washakie, these costs are difficult to bear.

For a clear picture of the sediment build-up on this island I direct your attention to the aerial photos in Appendix C that show the 20-year build-up of that island. We at the local level must confront this issue or the exact same flooding is likely to occur year after year depending on the severity of the winter. Following the 2014 flood we pursued the possibility of removing the island. Initial estimates at the time indicated that removal of about 1.7 acres of area at a depth of at least 5 feet, requiring about 1,700 truckloads would ensure free-flowing passage of ice blocks.

While a project like this is very small for an agency like the Army Corps, it is much too large for a community as small as ours to tackle on our own. Section 205 of the Flood Control Act of 1948 authorizes the Army Corps of Engineers to partner with local and state agencies on small flood damage reduction projects not specifically authorized by Congress. While we initially pursued a Section 205 project in 2015, we backed off after inquiries uncovered the likelihood of difficult and expensive bureaucratic hurdles, and the potential of more stringent and expensive environmental permits to remove the sediment island. Additionally, while the federal share of costs associated with these small projects is significant, we were concerned that the local share was still more than a rural agricultural-based county could meet. Finally, it appeared that the Army Corps simply hadn't used the Section 205 program for ice jams to the extent it had for other, more traditional flood damage control measures in other areas of the country and therefore may not have believed it had the flexibility necessary to deal effectively with the problem.

With that in mind we were pleased to see Congress include language specific to ice jams in the Water Infrastructure Improvements Act for the Nation, passed just two months ago, in December of 2016. Specifically:

SEC. 1150. ICE JAM PREVENTION AND MITIGATION.

(a) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary may carry out projects under section 205 of the Flood Control Act of 1948 (33 U.S.C. 701s), including planning, design, construction, and monitoring of structural and nonstructural technologies and measures, for preventing and mitigating flood damages associated with ice jams.

(b) INCLUSION.—The projects described in subsection (a) may include the development and demonstration of cost-effective technologies and designs developed in consultation with—

- (1) the Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory of the Corps of Engineers;*
- (2) universities;*
- (3) Federal, State, and local agencies; and*
- (4) private organizations.*

(c) PILOT PROGRAM.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—During fiscal years 2017 through 2022, the Secretary shall identify and carry out not fewer than 10 projects under this section to demonstrate technologies and designs developed in accordance with this section.

(2) PROJECT SELECTION.—The Secretary shall ensure that the projects are selected from all cold regions of the United States, including the Upper Missouri River Basin and the Northeast.

Removal of the island appears to be the solution to our flooding in Worland, but at the local level we are flexible enough to explore other options if the Army Corps is flexible enough to make use of this new language to research and explore cost effective technologies to mitigate what is likely to be a repeated disaster in our area. We remain concerned about the monetary and human capital costs associated with these projects. However, Washakie County stands ready to work alongside the Army Corps of Engineers on any viable and cost-effective solution for the protection of our community. We hope that Washakie County and the Big Horn River will be among the first of the cold region pilot projects.

Seasonal runoff or unique weather events are things over which we have no control, but the floods caused by ice jams and a sediment island in the Big Horn River is something we can control with assistance from the Army Corps of Engineers. I am here to ask for both the Corps and your help to ensure that as you move forward with funding infrastructure projects of great importance to the nation, that you do not forget these small projects in rural areas that are of critical importance to our local communities.

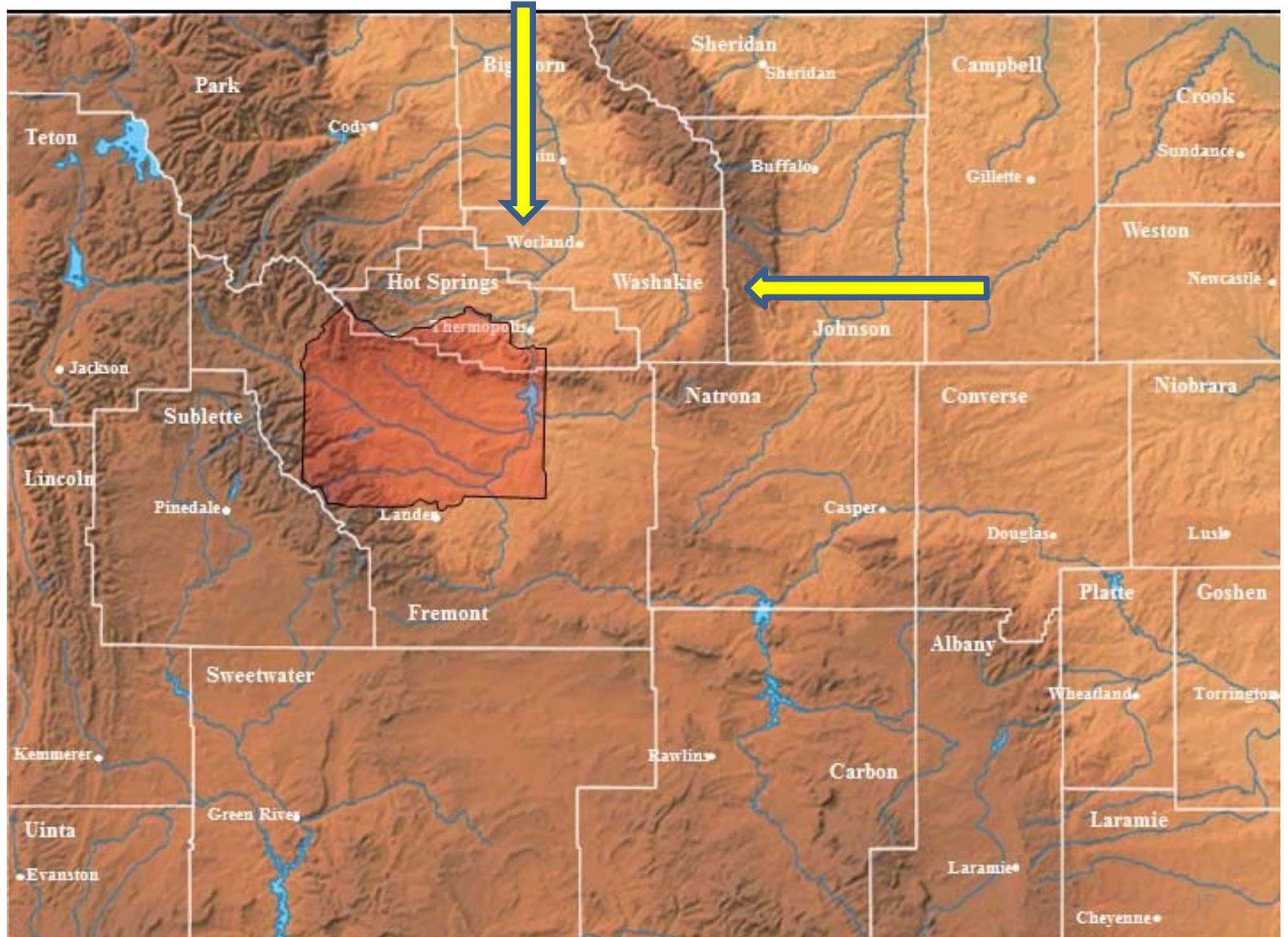
Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Appendix A - Map

Washakie County, Wyoming

Location:
North
Central
Wyoming

Worland sits
directly on
the Bighorn
River



Appendix B - 2017 Worland Flood

Before



After



Before



After



Appendix C - Worland Sediment Island

