

**Statement of
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Bureau of Land Management
Department of the Interior
Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining
S. 258, Grazing Improvement Act
April 25, 2013**

Thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior (Department) on S.258, the Grazing Improvement Act. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is dedicated to a broad range of stewardship goals, including the long-term health and viability of the public rangelands. Our Nation's rangelands provide and support a variety of goods, services, and values important to Americans. In addition to being an important source of forage for livestock, healthy rangelands conserve soil, store and filter water, sequester carbon, provide a home for an abundance of wildlife, provide scenic beauty and are the setting for many forms of outdoor recreation.

The BLM recognizes that the conservation and sustainable use of rangelands is important to those who make their living on these landscapes—including public rangeland permittees. Public land livestock operations are important to the economic well-being and cultural identity of the West and to rural Western communities. Livestock grazing is an integral part of BLM's multiple-use mission, and at the right levels and timing, can serve as an important vegetation management tool, improving wildlife habitat and reducing risk of catastrophic wildfire.

The BLM is committed to collaborating with those who work on the public lands and takes seriously its challenge to conserve and manage healthy rangelands for current and future generations.

The Department shares the Sub-committee's interest in identifying opportunities for increasing efficiencies in public land grazing administration, as well as finding ways to make permit renewal less complex, costly, and time-consuming. The BLM would like to work with the Committee to further these shared goals. However, the Department cannot support S. 258 as it limits the BLM's ability to provide for appropriate environmental review and public involvement—critical components of the BLM's multiple-use management of the public lands. The Department looks forward to continuing a dialogue with the Congress on these important matters.

Background

The BLM manages over 17,000 livestock grazing permits and leases for 12.4 million AUMs (animal unit months) across 155 million acres of public lands in the West. Since 1999, the BLM has evaluated the health of the rangelands based on standards and guidelines that were developed with extensive input from the ranching community, as well as from scientists, conservationists, and other Federal and state agencies. The BLM collects monitoring and assessment data to compare current conditions with the standards and land use plan objectives. This information is

used to complete environmental assessments, to develop alternative management actions, and to modify grazing management as needed.

The BLM administers the range program through issuance of grazing permits or leases. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) provides for a 10-year (or less) term for grazing permits. In a typical year, the BLM processes up to 2,000 permit renewals or transfers. In 1999 and 2000, the BLM saw a spike in permit renewals, when over 7,200 permits were due for renewal. The BLM was unable to process all those permits before expiration, which resulted in a backlog of grazing permit renewals that remains today. By the end of the 2013 Fiscal Year, the BLM anticipates that a backlog of 4,964 unprocessed permits will remain. Congress has assisted the BLM since Fiscal Year 2004 by adding language to Appropriations measures that allow grazing leases and permits to continue in effect until the agency has completed processing a renewal, transfer, or waiver. The BLM is committed to eliminating the backlog of grazing permit renewals and to issuing permits in the year they expire. An increase in appeals and litigation of grazing management decisions continues to pose significant workload and resource challenges for the BLM.

The BLM will continue to focus on grazing permits for the most environmentally sensitive allotments, using authorities Congress provided in the FY 2012 Consolidated Appropriations Act concerning grazing permit renewals and transfers. This strategy will allow the BLM to address a wide array of critical resource management issues through its land health assessments and grazing decisions. Additionally, this strategy will help ensure that the backlog of unprocessed permits consists of the least environmentally sensitive allotments that are more custodial in nature and/or that are already meeting land health standards.

S. 258

S. 258 provides for automatic renewal of all expired, transferred, or waived permits, and categorically excludes all permit renewals, reissuance, or transfers from preparation of an environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) if the decision continues current grazing management of the allotment. Terms and conditions of the permit would continue until a permit is later renewed in full compliance with NEPA and other Federal laws. The bill does not first require a determination that the permittee is meeting land health standards. S. 258 doubles the duration of grazing permits from 10 to 20 years, and stipulates that livestock crossing and trailing permits and transfers of grazing preference are exempt from analysis under NEPA.

The Department supports the concept of having the flexibility to issue longer term permits in certain circumstances, as well as the transfer provision that is currently in place under the FY 2012 Consolidated Appropriations Act. That provision is expected to reduce the permit renewal workload in 2013 by about 700 permits. The number of transfers needing processing each year is unpredictable, posing significant challenges to the BLM as it works to manage staff and other resources.

S. 258 includes provisions that the Department cannot support since they provide for automatic permit or lease renewal without requiring further analysis or assurances the permittee is meeting land health standards. The bill limits the BLM's ability to provide for appropriate environmental review and public involvement. S. 258 would result in the majority of permits being renewed

under a categorical exclusion. The engagement of the public through the environmental review process under NEPA is a crucial component of the BLM's multiple-use management of the public lands. In summary, while S. 258 contains provisions that would expedite permitting, the Department cannot support it because of the overarching impact the bill could have on the 155 million acres of public lands used for livestock grazing, potentially affecting other valid uses and the health of the land itself.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on S. 258. The BLM looks forward to working with the Congress to develop improvements to the grazing permit renewal process while maintaining the integrity of NEPA, the Nation's bedrock environmental and citizen involvement law, and FLPMA, our multiple-use statute requiring consideration of many uses and values of the public lands. I will be pleased to answer any questions.