

**Statement of
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**Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, & Mining
S. 365, To improve rangeland conditions and restore grazing levels within the Grand
Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah
May 21, 2015**

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on S. 365, which pertains to the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) administration of grazing within the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (GSENM) in Utah. The Presidential proclamation designating GSENM in 1996 included language specifically providing for the continuation of grazing on the monument under the normal standards and procedures used to manage grazing on other BLM lands. The BLM supports the bill's goal of improving rangeland health and supporting grazing within GSENM, yet the Administration opposes the bill as currently drafted because it appears to set an arbitrary grazing-level target rather than establishing appropriate grazing levels according to resource conditions and through public processes. The BLM is committed to continuing to work with Congress and the public as we plan for grazing on GSENM.

Background

GSENM spans nearly 1.9 million acres of America's public lands. From its spectacular Grand Staircase of cliffs and terraces, across the rugged Kaiparowits Plateau, to the Escalante River Canyons, the Monument's size, resources, and remote character provide extraordinary opportunities for geologists, paleontologists, archeologists, historians, and biologists in scientific research, education, and exploration. GSENM was established in 1996 by Presidential Proclamation 6920 under the Antiquities Act of 1906 to protect a spectacular array of historic, biological, geological, paleontological, and archeological objects. The proclamation did not affect existing grazing permits and specified that grazing uses continue to be governed by the normal standards and procedures used to manage grazing on other BLM lands. No reductions in permitted livestock grazing use have been made as a result of the Monument's designation.

Management of resources at GSENM is governed by the 1999 Monument Management Plan. However, the MMP deferred most decisions related to the management of livestock grazing, and livestock grazing on GSENM is generally managed according to four Management Framework Plans (MFPs), which were signed in 1981, making them among the BLM's oldest land use plans. The MFPs were amended to address grazing on a few allotments in 1999, but most allotments in GSENM are still managed under direction that is now nearly 35 years old. The BLM is currently preparing a Livestock Grazing Monument Management Plan Amendment and associated Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to ensure the long-term sustainability of GSENM rangelands while accounting for the many changes that have occurred since 1981. The BLM is

working in formal cooperation with Kane and Garfield counties and the state of Utah and has allowed for maximum public input in developing the plan.

There are 79 active livestock grazing allotments, with 91 permittees currently authorized to graze cattle and horses on GSENM. Overall permitted use within GSENM is at roughly the same level now as it has been since the early 1990s. No reductions have occurred as a result of the designation of GSENM, though small reductions within limited areas have taken place under normal BLM procedures to protect riparian resources and to address other issues. Similar changes are routinely made across the west to address these sorts of resource concerns. Since 1999, the BLM has used its authority under an annual appropriations rider to renew all expiring livestock grazing permits/leases on the monument.

In contrast to permitted use, actual grazing use levels in GSENM have varied considerably from year to year. BLM range conservationists nationwide work closely with grazing permittees to identify and address resource issues. Livestock operators throughout the BLM often operate voluntarily at an actual level of use that is below their permitted level due to fluctuations in market prices, their operational needs, drought conditions, or vegetation condition. As a result of such voluntary adjustments, actual use levels have averaged just over half of permitted use levels for more than two decades.

S. 365

S. 365 is intended to improve rangeland conditions and restore grazing levels within GSENM. Under the bill, the BLM would be required to implement a management program to improve rangeland conditions for wildlife and livestock and to restore livestock grazing to the level of usage in those areas that existed as of September 17, 1996. In issuing livestock grazing permits, the Secretary would be required to incorporate standards and guidelines consistent with the 1997 “Utah Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Grazing Management for BLM Lands in Utah” and applicable livestock grazing regulations, as is now the case.

The BLM supports improving rangeland conditions by using the “Utah Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Grazing Management for BLM Lands in Utah” and all applicable BLM regulations related to grazing when issuing or renewing grazing permits on GSENM. Under the BLM’s current planning process, we anticipate updating the grazing direction in GSENM according to the Utah Standards and Guidelines, and we believe the MMP amendment will provide a framework for future restoration work that will address the bill’s goal of improving rangeland conditions. However, the BLM does not support managing rangelands according to arbitrary targets of use, which may be inappropriate depending on resource condition, but rather supports management of rangelands by adjusting targets of use according to resource conditions and through transparent public processes under the principles of multiple use and sustained yield.

Conclusion

Thank you for inviting me to testify on S. 365. The Department of the Interior is committed to ensuring that grazing within the GSENM is managed in a manner that will achieve land health standards through proper grazing management. I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.

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S. 583, Sawtooth National Recreation Area and Jerry Peak Wilderness Additions Act
May 21, 2015**

Thank you for the invitation to testify on S. 583, Sawtooth National Recreation Area and Jerry Peak Wilderness Additions Act. The Department of the Interior supports S. 583 as it applies to lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and would like the opportunity to work with the sponsor and the Committee on technical modifications to the legislation and minor boundary modifications to improve manageability. We defer to the Department of Agriculture regarding provisions of S. 583 which apply to National Forest System Lands.

Background

The Boulder-White Clouds area of central Idaho captivates the imagination with crystal lakes, high mountain backcountry, and abundant wildlife. Hunters, hikers, ranchers and other stakeholders have come together to support preservation of these unique and treasured lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service (FS) and the BLM.

The lands managed by the BLM in this region represent diverse ecosystems ranging from lower elevation sagebrush and grasses to lodgepole and limber pine at the higher elevations. There are large forested areas in the upper reaches of Bear, Mosquito, Sage, and Lake Creek drainages. The highest point is Jerry Peak at over 10,000 feet where there are spectacular vistas of the surrounding mountain ranges. Herd Lake, at over 7,000 feet, is a small blue gem within the steep rocky terrain. From the small Herd Lake campsite visitors can hike the trail along the creek to Herd Lake. The shores of the lake have scattered pines and there are wonderful opportunities to fish for rainbow trout.

This varied and magnificent terrain provides habitat for wildlife, including deer, elk, black bear, mountain lion, bighorn sheep, and antelope. Coyotes and golden eagles are also common. The area is attractive to hunters and a significant portion of the yearly visitation occurs during hunting season.

S. 583

S. 583 is the result of many years of collaborative efforts by the Idaho Congressional delegation. Their dedication to resolving public land use issues in central Idaho is commendable. Title I of the bill designates three new wilderness areas – Jim McClure-Jerry Peak Wilderness (approximately 117,000 acres), White Clouds Wilderness (approximately 91,000 acres), and Hemingway-Boulders Wilderness (approximately 68,000 acres) and contains provisions related to their administration. Approximately 24,000 acres of the proposed Jerry Peak Wilderness are managed by the BLM, along with approximately 450 acres of the proposed White Clouds Wilderness. The FS manages the other federal lands within the proposed wilderness areas. The Department of the Interior supports the proposed wilderness designations on lands managed by

the BLM and would welcome the opportunity to work with the sponsor and the Committee on minor boundary modifications to the Jerry Peak Wilderness to improve manageability. We would also like to recommend minor modifications to management language to be consistent with usual wilderness management language. Section 108 releases nearly 80,000 acres of BLM-managed lands in four wilderness study areas (WSAs) from WSA restrictions.

Livestock grazing on the public lands designated as wilderness, and in the surrounding area, is addressed in section 102(e) of the bill. The BLM supports this standard language on the management of livestock grazing on public lands within designated wilderness. Section 102(e) also establishes the “Boulder White Clouds Grazing Area” on nearly 770,000 acres of public lands administered by the FS and BLM – surrounding and including the three areas designated as wilderness. Under the provisions of this section, ranchers with Federal grazing permits or leases within this area may choose to voluntarily donate their permits or leases to the Secretary of Agriculture or Interior. The Secretaries are required to accept these donations, and to permanently terminate all grazing on the land covered by the permit or lease. Partial donation and congruent partial termination of grazing is also provided for under this subsection. Grazing can be a compatible use within wilderness, and there is a long history of legislation accommodating grazing within wilderness designations. However, we also recognize and support the proposal by the Idaho delegation to allow voluntary and permanent reductions in grazing in these unique and environmentally sensitive areas.

Title II of S. 583 provides for the conveyance, at no cost, of 12 small tracts of public lands to local governments for public purposes. The BLM generally supports the conveyances of nine individual parcels of BLM-administered lands to local governments, but notes that some of the parcels to be conveyed contain habitat for the Greater Sage-Grouse. We would like the opportunity to work with the sponsor on modifications to some of the conveyances to minimize impacts to Greater Sage-Grouse habitat. We defer to the FS regarding three conveyances of National Forest System lands. As provided in the bill, each of the conveyances of lands managed by the BLM would be for uses consistent with public purposes allowed under the R&PP Act, which authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to lease or convey public lands at nominal cost for recreational and public purposes, including parks and other facilities benefiting the public. In general, the BLM supports appropriate legislative conveyances if the lands are to be used for purposes consistent with the Recreation and Public Purposes (R&PP) Act, if the conveyance includes a reversionary clause to enforce this requirement, and if the benefitting local government is responsible for the administrative costs of the conveyance.

Among the proposed conveyances of BLM-administered public lands are 10 acres for a fire hall, 80 acres for a waste transfer site to Custer County, and 23 acres to the city of Clayton for a cemetery. The BLM has reviewed each of these conveyances in the bill. We believe they are in the public interest, and support their no-cost conveyance for uses that would be allowed under the R&PP Act if the bill is amended to provide that the receiving parties cover the costs of the conveyances, including any needed surveys and the preparation of conveyance documents.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of S. 583. We applaud the work of the Idaho delegation, of the sponsor of this bill, Senator Risch, and the vision and commitment of

Congressman Mike Simpson, who has championed the effort to protect these unique landscapes in Idaho for over a decade in partnership with his colleagues in the Senate.

We look forward to working with Members of the Idaho delegation and the Committee to make further, minor modifications to the bill to permanently protect these important landscapes as a part of the National Wilderness Preservation System and to affect the land transfers directed in the bill to provide specific public benefits to local communities.

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S. 1240, Cerros del Norte Conservation Act
May 21, 2015**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S. 1240, the Cerros del Norte Conservation Act. On March 25, 2013, President Obama designated the Río Grande del Norte National Monument on 242,555 acres of land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in northern New Mexico. This legislation includes the designation of two wilderness areas within the new Río Grande del Norte National Monument – the proposed 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta Wilderness and 8,000-acre Río San Antonio Wilderness. The Department supports the designation of these two new wilderness areas.

Background

The Río Grande del Norte National Monument lies north of Taos on the border with Colorado and straddles New Mexico's Taos and Rio Arriba Counties. Rising in stark contrast from the monument's broad expanse, the Cerro de la Olla, Cerro San Antonio, and Cerro del Yuta volcanic cones provide visible reminders of the area's volatile past. Between these mountains, the dramatic gorge of the Río Grande Wild & Scenic River is carved into the landscape, revealing the dark basalt beneath the surface of the Taos plateau.

The proposed Cerro del Yuta Wilderness has at its centerpiece a symmetrical volcanic dome soaring to over 10,000 feet in altitude. Covered by ponderosa, Douglas fir, aspen, and spruce on the north side, and pinyon and juniper on the south side, the mountain provides important habitat for wildlife, including the herds of elk that draw hunters to the area. The volcanic dome provides an outstanding opportunity for peak climbing, and the forested slopes create a strong sense of solitude.

The proposed Río San Antonio Wilderness consists of a flat plain bisected by the Río San Antonio. This grassland plain is dotted with occasional juniper, while the river sits 200 feet below the surface of the plateau at the bottom of a rugged gorge, the depths of which provide a microclimate for riparian vegetation, Douglas fir, and spruce. Visitors can find outstanding opportunities for solitude as they explore the gorge, which abruptly drops out of sight from the rest of the area. Protecting these characteristics will help to ensure that recreationists will continue to visit the area, bringing economic benefits to the local community.

S. 1240

S.1240 designates two wilderness areas on BLM-managed lands within the new National Monument – the proposed 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta Wilderness and 8,000-acre Río San Antonio Wilderness. Both of these areas meet the definition of wilderness in the Wilderness Act of 1964: they are largely untouched by humans, have outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, are over 5,000 acres in size, and contain important

geological, biological, and scientific features. We support the designation of these areas as wilderness, and would appreciate the opportunity to work with the sponsor on potential boundary modifications for manageability.

Conclusion

President Obama's designation of the Río Grande del Norte National Monument was a tribute to both the area's extraordinary value and the steadfast support of the surrounding community for protecting this magnificent place. The Department supports S.1240 in its designation of some of the new Río Grande del Norte National Monument's wildest lands as wilderness.