

Statement for the Record

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**Senate Energy and Natural Resources Public Lands, Forests, and Mining
Subcommittee**

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Chair Barrasso, Ranking Member Cortez Masto, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of S. 1005, the Southern Nevada Economic Development and Conservation Act.

My name is Jocelyn Torres, and I am the Chief Conservation Officer for the Conservation Lands Foundation. We represent a broad, nonpartisan, national network of community leaders and advocates solely focused on protecting lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

The work of the Conservation Lands Foundation and our network of more than 80 community-based organizations across the West is something personally important to me. Having grown up in Las Vegas, Nevada, the ancestral homelands of the Southern Paiute people, there were recreational opportunities easily within reach. And although the community has significantly grown since then, we have done so without diminishing the quality of our public lands and recreational opportunities.

If anything, thanks to legislation, such as the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act and the Land and Water Conservation Fund, recreational opportunities have improved. In the last year alone, I attended a groundbreaking for the Sloan Canyon National Conservation Area visitor center and took the newest member of our family to the visitor center for the Ice Age Fossils State Park which opened in 2024.

All my life Nevada's public lands have taken care of me, my loved ones and my community. It's important to me that I care for the land in return, and it is something the Southern Nevada community values as well.

The essence of the Southern Nevada bill before you revolves around this shared concept that we mitigate for the resources we use, in order to grow and thrive as a community. This was the basis for the community conversations which began almost a decade ago to craft this legislation. The early days involved several meetings with different communities from conservation to affordable housing to economic development interests. Those conversations continue to this day not only between the bill sponsor, Senator Cortez Masto, and these various interested parties, but also through healthy debates at municipal planning meetings, roundtables and presentations regarding zoning, water conservation and affordable housing.

I'm here today to ask you to continue this historic bipartisan work, and move this bill forward. You have an opportunity before you to not only enhance protections for places, such as Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area and the Desert National Wildlife Refuge but also do so in a manner that invests in the local economy by addressing the needs of a rapidly growing region in a thoughtful manner.

Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area is expected to see more than 4 million visitors this year. This bill would expand Red Rock Canyon NCA by more than 50,000 acres, allowing for more opportunities to hike and bike, and more protected areas for the endangered Mojave Desert tortoise. Often referred to as Southern Nevada's crown jewel, Red Rock Canyon was Nevada's first National Conservation Area, originally protected for its unique and nationally important geological, ecological and cultural values.

The Desert National Wildlife Refuge, the largest national wildlife refuge outside of Alaska, is the wildest part of the Silver State, containing Nevada's best wildlife habitat and one of the largest populations of desert bighorn sheep in the state.

The Refuge has been utilized for thousands of years by the Southern Paiute people, settlers and today's Southern Nevada residents and visitors alike. Originally proposed as Wilderness in 1974 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, it's past time that we conserve its priceless cultural, recreational and ecological values.

Beyond conserving and enhancing some of Southern Nevada's most beloved places at a time when the demand for public lands access is at an all-time high and the need for enhanced conservation is at a critical point, the Southern Nevada Economic Development and Conservation Act would also restore lands to the Moapa Band of Paiute helping them also achieve their nation's conservation and economic development goals.

Nevada's federal and local elected officials, Tribal governments and local communities have come together to put the proposals before you today. The work to conserve our landscapes and quality of life has always been important, and I know this Subcommittee understands the urgency and importance of action in ensuring we uphold these values.

Lastly, the Conservation Lands Foundation would also like to express our support for four other bills under consideration today:

- S.764 Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy (CORE) Act, sponsored by Senators Bennet and Hickenlooper of Colorado.
- S. 1195 Pershing County Economic Development and Conservation Act, sponsored by Senator Rosen of Nevada.
- S. 1319 Pecos Watershed Protection Act and S. 1476 M.H. Dutch Salmon Greater Gila Wild and Scenic River Act, both sponsored by Senators Heinrich and Luján of New Mexico.

These four bills, like the Southern Nevada Economic Development and Conservation Act, honor commitments to strengthen our bonds with the lands we know and love.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this testimony. I am here to answer any questions you may have.