

**Statement of
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**Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, & Mining
S. 2249, Rio Puerco Watershed Management Program Reauthorization Act
February 7, 2018**

Thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior (Department) on S. 2249, the Rio Puerco Watershed Management Program Reauthorization Act. The Rio Puerco Management Committee has been a historically important collaborative tool for supporting rural communities and traditional uses of the public lands. S. 2249 would permanently reauthorize the Rio Puerco Management Committee (RPMC) and the Rio Puerco Watershed Management Program. The Department recommends that the RPMC be reauthorized for a limited ten-year period.

Background

The Rio Puerco Watershed located in west central New Mexico contains the most significant tributary in the Middle Rio Grande Basin. Covering nearly 7,350 square miles, it includes 9 sub-watersheds that drain into portions of 7 counties west of the Rio Grande. Over the past half century, the Rio Puerco Watershed has become severely degraded because of accelerated erosion and high sediment loads. According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, soil erosion within this watershed surpasses that of any other watershed in the country.

Established by the Omnibus Parks and Land Management Act of 1996 (Public Law 104-333) and reauthorized in 2009, the RPMC is a collaborative organization convened and facilitated by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) that consists of State, Federal, and Tribal entities, soil and water conservation districts, representatives of county governments, residents from rural communities within the watershed, environmental and conservation groups, and the public. The purpose of the RPMC is to advise the Secretary of the Interior, acting through the BLM, on developing and implementing the Rio Puerco Management Program, also established by Public Law 104-333. As per the law, the Rio Puerco Management Program provides support to the RPMC as the RPMC collects data on the watershed, identifies best management practices, and monitors ongoing programs. Further, the RPMC acts as a forum for information about activities affecting the development and implementation of best management practices in the Rio Puerco Watershed.

Since the creation of the RPMC in 1996, the BLM has partnered with the many local groups that comprise the RPMC on projects that have improved the overall health of the watershed and have supported, educated, and even employed members of the local rural community. For example, in cooperation with the New Mexico State Highway and Transportation Department, the RPMC engaged in restoration activities that redirected the Rio Puerco from its unstable, channelized

path to a meandering, natural route. Through a grant provided by the New Mexico Environment Department, the RPMC worked with private landowners on erosion control, vegetation management, and grazing management projects to improve the water quality in two degraded tributaries of the Rio Puerco Watershed. Finally, the RPMC worked with chapters of the Eastern Navajo to train participants in a summer youth program to install structures that support grazing programs.

These are just a few examples of the many projects that the RPMC has made possible in partnership with the local community, and Federal agencies like the BLM, in support of responsible multiple uses on the public lands, working landscapes, and traditional uses such as grazing. Although no new projects have been funded since 2013, the RPMC has continued to meet approximately quarterly for the last five years. In the absence of project funding, the committee's primary focus has turned to regaining participation and momentum for on-the-ground project work focused on watershed improvement.

S. 2249, Rio Puerco Watershed Management Program Reauthorization Act

S. 2249 permanently reauthorizes the Rio Puerco Watershed Management Program and the RPMC. The bill also authorizes appropriations for fiscal year 2017 and each fiscal year thereafter. The RPMC was originally authorized for a ten-year period, and was reauthorized for an additional ten years in 2009. The BLM recommends that the sponsor and the Subcommittee consider reauthorizing the committee for a limited ten-year period in this instance as well.

The BLM has appreciated the opportunity to work closely with its partners in the local community on improving the health of the Rio Puerco watershed. Although projects undertaken by the Rio Puerco Watershed Committee have been funded primarily through appropriations in the past, the Department of the Interior is currently undertaking a review of grants and cooperative agreements with outside groups and agencies, and would like to carefully evaluate the work of the RPMC in the context of this review.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on S. 2249, Rio Puerco Watershed Management Program Reauthorization Act. We appreciate the work of the sponsor on this legislation, and we look forward to collaborating with him and the Subcommittee as the bill moves through the legislative process.