

## **Written Statement for the Record**

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Chair Cortez Masto, Ranking Member Lee, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify today in support of S. 567, the Southern Nevada Economic Development and Conservation Act and S. 609, the Ruby Mountains Protection Act.

My name is Jocelyn Torres, and I am the Senior Field Director for the Conservation Lands Foundation. Our mission is to protect, restore and expand the public lands vital for the health of our planet and communities.

Our mission is something very near and dear to my heart. Having grown up in Las Vegas, Nevada, the ancestral lands of the Southern Paiute people, you can imagine that there weren't a ton of recreational activities available to those of us under 21 years of age - that is with the exception of our public lands.

I spent countless hours hiking, camping and soaking in the sun with my family and friends, and annually made the journey north to the Ruby Mountains for a family hunting trip.

For years, Nevada's public lands have taken care of me, my loved ones and my community. I'm here today to ask you to preserve our most valuable resource by enhancing protections for places, such as Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, the Desert National Wildlife Refuge and the Ruby Mountains, because when we take care of our public lands, they take care of us.

Nowhere is that connection more important and possible than in Nevada. Our public lands present our best chance to address climate change, our biodiversity crisis and invest in our local communities and economies.

The Southern Nevada Economic Development and Conservation Act is the embodiment of this connection. It would be the largest conservation bill in Nevada history, help

address the climate crisis by opening up funding opportunities for local sustainability and climate projects, and invest in the local economy by addressing the needs of a rapidly growing region in a thoughtful manner. In addition, the legislation would restore lands to the Moapa Band of Paiute.

This historic piece of legislation would conserve and enhance 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.

One of those beloved places, 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.

Another of those beloved places is the Desert National Wildlife Refuge, the largest national wildlife refuge outside of Alaska. The area 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.

Wilderness Areas proposed within the Desert National Wildlife Refuge:

- **Sheep Range Wilderness Area:**
  - The massive Sheep Range Proposed Wilderness is one of the most topographically and ecologically diverse wild areas in the country, with elevations reaching nearly 10,000 feet on Hayford Peak. There is a unique ability to experience the full spectrum of the seven life-zones that characterize the Mojave here, from creosote bushes to Joshua trees to bristlecone pines. The stunning exposed limestone-spine of the range creates dramatic walls and ever changing colors as the hours, weather, and seasons change. The Sheep Range has been utilized by people for thousands of years and remains important to the Southern Paiute people.
- **Las Vegas Range Wilderness:**
  - The Mormon Well Road defines the west and north boundary of the area and provides access to several of its more spectacular landmarks: the Yucca Forest, the spectacular Peek-a-Boo Canyon, Desert Pass Campground, Mormon Well, and Sawmill Wash. Pinyon/Juniper

Woodlands dominate the upper plant community throughout most of the area's higher elevations, although there is a small stand of Ponderosa Pines near Mormon Pass.

- **Gass Peak Wilderness Area:**
  - This southernmost rampart of the Las Vegas Range is separated from the greater portion by a fault valley. Paleozoic limestone formations paint Gass Peak with bold, contrasting bands of color and create steep and rugged cliffs. The summit of Gass Peak provides outstanding vistas, including a raptors-eye-view of the urban Las Vegas Valley.
- **Hole-In-The-Rock Wilderness Area:**
  - Vast, low-relief country characterizes the southern portion of Hole-In-The-Rock proposed wilderness, with the Desert Dry Lake playa providing sediment for sand dunes. Volcanic hills, colorful cliffs, walls, and isolated boulders carved by the ceaseless processes of erosion populate the northern portion of this area. The western half (approx.) of this wilderness is co-managed by the US Fish & Wildlife Service and military, closed to public use by the military, and is inaccessible to visitors.
- **Desert Range Wilderness Area:**
  - The well-traveled Alamo Road forms the eastern boundary of this area where blackbrush and Joshua trees are common. Most of this area is co-managed by the US Fish & Wildlife Service and military, closed to public use by the military, and is inaccessible to visitors.
- **Pintwater-East Desert-Spotted Range Wilderness Area:**
  - This area contains a vast amount of rough, mountainous terrain. Bighorn sheep are spread thinly throughout the unit because vegetation is sparse and water sources far apart. Both the Pintwater and Desert Ranges comprise important bighorn lambing areas. It includes Pintwater cave, a site culturally important to many Tribal Nations. Archaeologists have found artifacts estimated to be 6,500 years old. This area is co-managed by the US Fish & Wildlife Service and military, closed to public use by the military, and is inaccessible to visitors.
- **Desert Bighorn Wilderness Area:**
  - This vast area comprises the westernmost portion of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge. It's a crucial transitional habitat for bighorn sheep and supports a multitude of other Mojave plants and animals. This area is co-managed by the US Fish & Wildlife Service and military, closed to public use by the military, and is inaccessible to visitors.

There are also several Wilderness areas proposed for permanent protection in S. 567 outside of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge.

- **Mt. Stirling Wilderness**
  - The Mount Stirling Wilderness Study Area and additions are a landscape of canyons and ridges with heavy forest cover transitioning down to an

extensive wild and natural alluvial fan system. Located on the north of Mt. Charleston Wilderness, this massive wilderness comprises the northernmost Spring Mountains complex and the contiguous alluvial system of Indian Springs Valley. The entirety of this wilderness was recognized for its natural habitat and wildlife importance in 1936 when it was included in the original boundaries of the Desert Game Range (today's Desert National Wildlife Refuge). Today this wilderness still offers the natural habitat it was recognized for in 1936, an important resource rapidly diminishing under the pressure of Southern Nevada growth and development. The rugged highlands provide challenging hiking routes to peaks, Paleozoic marine fossiliferous formations, and scenic vistas of the surrounding valleys. In contrast, the expansive alluvial plains offer sublime open vistas, and classic Mojave vegetation that connect with the sky in all directions. Two large petroglyph sites, and remnants of a pine nut milling site provide a glimpse into the deep Native American history of the region. Three charcoal kilns are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and help remind visitors of the industrial history of the area.

- **Gates the Grand Canyon Wilderness**, which we are proposing as the name for the following National Park Service Wilderness Study Areas, and which surround portions of the Gold Butte National Monument:
  - **Overton Wilderness Area**
    - Most of this area consists of flat to “badland-like” lands sloping from mountainous terrain westward to Lake Mead. It forms the scenic background for lake users and shoreline users on the westside of the Overton Arm. It sits between the Overton Arm and the already designated Lime Canyon Wilderness area.
  - **Twin Springs Wilderness Area**
    - Much like the Overton Proposed Wilderness, gently sloping outwash fans extend from the mountain fronts to plunge abruptly into Lake Mead. It provides a scenic backdrop for the Virgin Basin section of Lake Mead.
  - **Scanlon Wash Wilderness Area**
    - This is a historic land with grand scenery. It was travelled in the early 1900s when mule teams pulled freight wagons from the historic Gold Butte Townsite to the historic Scanlon Ferry Colorado River Crossing.
  - **Hiller Mountains Wilderness Area**
    - The Hiller Mountains are adjacent to the already designated Jumbo Springs Wilderness. The highest and the most prominent mountain is Gold Cross Peak at 3,422 ft.
  - **Hell's Kitchen Wilderness Area**
    - From Hell's Kitchen, visitors will find glimpses into Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument and the place where the

Colorado River enters Lake Mead, changing from muddy brown water to clear blue.

- **South Million Hills Wilderness Area**
  - Rock outcrops and other geologic features provide fantastic scenic vistas and secluded getaways.
- **Lucy Gray Wilderness**
  - This area encompasses the southern portion of the Lucy Gray Range. It's composed of ancient metamorphic rock that appears soft, with mellow rounded edges from afar, but are rocky and rough up close.
- **New York Mountains Wilderness Area Additions**
  - The New York Mountains are a southwest by northeast trending range crowned with castle-like formations along the California/Nevada border. This range is about 30 miles long with the northeast end crossing into Nevada. The Nevada portion of this range features scattered pinyon/juniper trees in the highest elevations while most of the area is characterized by rolling hills clothed in lush Mojave vegetation including native grasses, cholla, Joshua trees, yucca, barrel cactus, and black brush plant communities. These rolling uplands are dissected by long, sinuous desert washes. The northernmost portion of these additions feature multicolored volcanic hills. This area is ideal for those seeking a quiet, quintessential Mojave experience. This area is an extension to the Mojave Wilderness Area (NPS in California), established in P.L. 103–433.
- **Piute Mountains Wilderness Area Additions**
  - The Piute Mountains exhibit strong color contrast and texture that vary from very angular, jagged volcanics to rounded, smooth granite hills. Prairie falcon eyries are known to exist in the area. The Nevada portion of this Wilderness consists of a 50/50 split between dark volcanic buttes and a large bajada supporting yuccas, creosote brush, and the occasional small mesquite tree. This bajada provides excellent habitat for the threatened desert tortoise and the human variant of desert rat who thrives in pristine Mojave desert landscapes. This area is an extension to the Mojave Wilderness Area (NPS in California), established in P.L. 103–433.
- **Bridge Canyon Wilderness Area Additions**
  - The Bridge Canyon Wilderness additions include the high headwater peaks for the Bridge Canyon Wilderness. These mountains tower to 4900 feet and offer spectacular vistas of the Colorado River Valley and the broad alluvial valleys of southernmost Nevada. The highlands feature jagged peaks clad in an open pinyon/juniper forest. The rolling foothills feature sculpted granite rock formations and rocky ridges. Around and between the rock outcrops, tall yuccas, barrel cactus, and massive cholla rise from the colorful creosote plant community. These Wilderness additions help to expand the protections for the full diversity of this natural wild Nevada landscape.
- **Eldorado Wilderness Area Additions**

- Volcanic activity 15 million years ago created the intricate web of peaks, gentle slopes of lava flows, and side canyons with craggy cliffs. These multicolored formations include the Bridge Springs drainage, which begins as low-relief network of stream beds that consolidated into a steeply plunging canyon cutting through the core of the range, then spills out into a broad alluvial fan studded with a forest of cholla and prickly pear cactus. A third of the way down the canyon, a small spring appears beneath a natural bridge, named Bridge Spring Arch or Gregory's Arch.
- **Ireteba Peaks Wilderness Area Additions**
  - Politics at the time of the Ireteba Peaks Wilderness designation neglected to include the wild and scenic western half of the rugged Ireteba Peaks. These additions correct this oversight and include this beautiful mountainous area and much of the alluvial fan habitat immediately west of the peaks. The southern portion of these additions include a beautiful canyon that terminates the highest portion of the peaks and descends toward the east to join a wide, sloping valley of alluvial fans clad in dense stands of cholla.
- **Muddy Mountains Wilderness Area Additions**
  - This addition includes protection for an area commonly known as Buffington Pockets, which offers stunning sandstone formations reminiscent of Valley of Fire State Park.
- **Nellis Wash Wilderness Area Additions**
  - This addition will more than double Nellis Wash Wilderness, an alluvial landscape with fingerlike drainages.
- **South McCullough Mountains Wilderness Area Additions**
  - These lower slopes of South McCullough Mountains Wilderness are composed of gently tilted alluvial deposits of unsorted sand, gravel, and cobbles. Desert bighorn sheep, mule deer, desert tortoise, Gambel's quail, chukar, northern flickers, and a variety of sparrows may be glimpsed in this wilderness.
- **Spirit Mountain Wilderness Area Additions**
  - Spirit Mountain (Avi Kwa Ame in the Mojave language) is considered the core of a sacred landscape for Yuman, Hopi, and Chemehuevi Paiute people. This small addition protects the westernmost slopes of the ghostly countenance Spirit Mountain.

Conserving land requires a community commitment. Local communities connected to the land are the ones who fight for its value day in and day out.

When local communities heard about the possibility of Nevada's treasured Ruby Mountains becoming victim to speculative and inappropriate oil and gas leasing, we jumped into action and so did Senator Cortez Masto.

Thanks to these collective efforts, we have the Ruby Mountains Protection Act before you today, a bill that would prohibit oil and gas development in the home of Nevada's

largest mule deer herd, and in the Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge. The Ruby Mountains region is one of the most important landscapes in Nevada for fish, wildlife, and recreation. Conserving this habitat corridor is crucial to the health and resiliency of the deer herd, migratory birds, and local communities alike.

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 three other bills under consideration today:

- S. 173, the Colorado Outdoor Recreation Economy (CORE) Act, sponsored by Senators Bennet and Hickenlooper of Colorado.
  - This bill would protect approximately 400,000 acres of public land in Colorado, including 73,000 acres of new wilderness areas and nearly 80,000 acres of new recreation and conservation management areas. This package of four conservation bills is the result of more than a decade of collaboration between the outdoor recreation community, conservation groups and local businesses. It also honors Colorado's military legacy and protects places of importance to ranchers and sportsmen from mineral development.
- S. 177, the Cerro de la Olla Wilderness Establishment Act, sponsored by Senators Heinrich and Lujan of New Mexico.
  - This bill would ensure further protection for Cerro de la Olla, a spectacular caldera with deep environmental, historical and cultural importance, within the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. This wilderness bill is supported by Taos Pueblo and a wide range of local elected officials, ranchers, sportsmen, conservation groups and outdoor recreation businesses.
- and S. 182, the Pecos Watershed Protection Act, also sponsored by Senators Heinrich and Lujan.
  - This bill would protect portions of the Pecos Watershed, where mining accidents have posed considerable threat to the people and wildlife, from future mineral development. The Jemez/Pecos Pueblo and Tesuque Pueblo have used the Watershed for hunting, fishing, herb gathering and ceremonial purposes for generations; and farmers, ranchers, hunters, anglers and outdoor recreationists are united with them in valuing the Pecos Valley and supporting its permanent protection.

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

Thank you again for the opportunity to share this testimony.