

**Statement of
Brian Steed
Deputy Director for Policy & Programs
Bureau of Land Management
U.S. Department of the Interior**

**Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, & Mining
S. 414, Pershing County Economic Development and Conservation Act
February 7, 2018**

Thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior (Department) to testify on S. 414, the Pershing County Economic Development and Conservation Act. This bill authorizes public land sales, exchanges, and conveyances in Pershing County, Nevada, and designates approximately 136,600 acres of public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) as seven new wilderness areas.

Background

Pershing County, located in northwestern Nevada, is home to nearly 7,000 people and encompasses just over 6,000 square miles. BLM-managed public lands in this part of Nevada provide opportunities for economic development and jobs, hunting and other forms of outdoor recreation, mineral development, livestock grazing, and conservation.

In 1976, with the passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), Congress directed the BLM to retain management of most public lands, thereby reducing the acreage that had been available for disposal in earlier years. Under FLPMA, the BLM is directed to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. The FLPMA also sets forth the BLM's multiple-use mission, directing that public lands be managed for a variety of uses, such as energy development, livestock grazing, conservation, mining, and recreation.

S. 414

S. 414 directs Federal land sales, exchanges, and conveyances in Pershing County, Nevada. The legislation also designates approximately 136,600 acres of public lands as seven wilderness areas and releases approximately 48,600 acres of BLM-managed WSAs from further study.

Public Land Sales & Exchanges (Titles I & II)

Title I of S. 414 directs the sale, at fair market value, or exchange of up to approximately 334,000 acres of BLM-managed public lands as specified on the legislative map and that have been identified as potentially suitable for disposal as part of the land use planning process. Title I requires that all lands authorized for sale or exchange be appraised en masse within one year of enactment and every five years thereafter. Any of these lands with an appraised value of less than \$500 per acre may be exchanged on an acre-for-acre basis with private land in a Management Priority Area, as identified by the Secretary, within the area depicted on the legislative map. Land sales under Title I may not exceed 150,000 acres; exchanges are exempted from this limitation. The first land sale must be completed within one year of enactment, with at

least one sale conducted every year thereafter, until the acreage limit for sales has been reached, or a sale postponement period requested by the county.

Title II of the bill directs the sale, at fair market value as determined by an appraisal, of up to approximately 102,000 acres of BLM-managed public lands identified on the legislative map to a “qualified entity,” which is defined in the bill as the owner or authorized leaseholder of the mining claims, mill sites, or tunnel sites currently existing on any portion of the lands to be sold. The qualified entity would assume all costs of the sales, including survey and administrative costs.

Proceeds from the sales directed by Titles I and II of the bill would be disbursed to the State of Nevada, Pershing County, and a special account in the U.S. Treasury for a number of specific purposes, including reimbursing costs associated with preparing sales, habitat conservation and restoration, and securing public access to Federal lands, among others.

Wilderness (Title III)

Title III of S. 414 designates seven wilderness areas totaling approximately 136,600 acres. Of these lands, approximately 55,100 acres are within existing wilderness study areas (WSAs) and approximately 81,500 acres have not previously been identified as suitable for wilderness by the BLM. Title III also releases approximately 48,600 acres from WSA status, allowing these areas to be managed according to the existing BLM land use plans. The Department notes that the lands proposed for wilderness designation by S. 414 generally serve as habitat for a diversity of plant and animal life and provide important opportunities for hiking, hunting, rock climbing, camping, horsepacking, and other forms of outdoor recreation in the Nevada desert.

Only Congress can determine whether to designate WSAs as wilderness or to release them for other multiple uses. The WSAs included in the proposed wilderness designations have been pending final resolution by Congress since 1991.

Conclusion

As a matter of policy, the Department supports the completion of land exchanges and transfers that further the public interest, consolidate ownership of scattered tracts of land to make them more manageable, and advance public policy objectives. The Department strongly supports restoring full collaboration and coordination with local communities and making the Department a better neighbor.

In his confirmation hearing, Secretary Zinke stated to the Committee that he does not support the wide-scale sale or transfer of Federal lands. The Department has substantive as well as minor technical modifications to recommend, and we look forward to working with the sponsor and the Committee to resolve these issues. The Department appreciates the work of Senator Heller on S. 414 and his efforts to promote multiple uses and foster economic development on BLM lands in Nevada.