

**Statement of  
Steve Ellis  
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U.S. Department of the Interior  
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
*“Firearms and Munitions at Risk: Examining Inadequate Safeguards”*  
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Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) firearms management practices. The dedicated men and women who make up the BLM law enforcement program play an integral role in ensuring public safety and fulfilling our multiple use and sustained yield mission. Every day, our officers put themselves in harm’s way to investigate vandalism and looting, support emergency response, and provide a safe environment for employees and visitors to the public lands.

The BLM is proud of the work our law enforcement officers and our local and state partners accomplish on behalf of the American people. We are committed to strengthening our law enforcement partnerships throughout the West and to working with state, county, and local officials in the most productive ways possible.

**Background**

Nationally, the BLM manages a wide variety of resources spread over 245 million acres of public lands and 700 million acres of subsurface mineral estate. These public land resources include timber, forage, energy and minerals, recreation, wild horse and burro herds, fish and wildlife habitat, wilderness areas, and archaeological and paleontological sites. There are many federal laws and regulations that guide the BLM in managing the public lands, and the BLM has been given specific resource protection and law enforcement responsibilities that further our mission. The BLM manages more than 10 percent of the nation’s surface area yet has one of the smallest law enforcement organizations among the Department of the Interior’s bureaus. The BLM has roughly one law enforcement officer for every 1 million acres of public land.

The public lands managed by the BLM are predominantly located in the western U.S., including Alaska, and consist of extensive grassland, forest, high mountain, arctic tundra, and desert landscapes. Each of these landscapes has a diversity of resources. As a result, the specific duties of each BLM law enforcement officer can vary considerably. For example, in the southwestern desert, officers may spend a considerable amount of time dealing with large numbers of recreational off-highway vehicle users as well as archaeological resources crimes; officers along the southern border frequently contend with the effects of illegal border crossings and drug smuggling; officers in urban interface areas encounter a variety of trespass crimes that include arson and hazardous materials dumping; and officers in the northern states regularly deal with marijuana cultivation and illegal commercial outfitting activities. In all areas, BLM law enforcement officers work in cooperation with local sheriff’s offices, state agencies, and other federal law enforcement agencies.

## **Firearms Management**

The BLM has approximately 185 Law Enforcement Rangers (uniformed officers) and 75 Special Agents (criminal investigators) on staff who enforce a wide range of laws and regulations in the prevention, detection, and investigation of crimes affecting public lands resources. The BLM provides each law enforcement officer with the necessary tools to protect themselves and others as they carry out their official duties. The BLM is vigilant about its responsibility to control, secure, and safeguard the firearms that its law enforcement officers are issued to carry out their duties and responsibilities.

The standard firearms issue for each officer is: 1) a semi-automatic pistol for primary duty carry; 2) a semi-automatic pistol as a back-up weapon; 3) a shotgun; and 4) a semi-automatic rifle. The Department of the Interior outlines policies for firearms inventory, accounting, control, disposal and destruction. As detailed in the Department's letter to the Committee on this issue, transmitted last month, those procedures are included in the Departmental Manual, in Federal Regulations, and in General Services Administration Federal Property Management Regulations. Among other requirements, Departmental policy mandates that bureaus perform a physical firearm inventory of issued firearms twice yearly.

On rare occasions, the BLM's law enforcement officers may seize or confiscate firearms as part of criminal investigations or when an owner voluntarily surrenders them. Under Departmental policy these firearms must be tracked and managed appropriately. Federal Regulations, GSA Guidelines, and Department of the Interior Property Management Directives are also followed when the BLM periodically disposes of or destroys seized or confiscated firearms and other firearms deemed unserviceable, excess, voluntarily relinquished, or abandoned and not suitable for government use.

In the event that a firearm is lost or stolen, the BLM complies with Department policies that mandate the following protocols: 1) notification must be provided to the Department within 24 hours for all lost or stolen firearms; 2) each incident must be thoroughly documented and investigated; 3) lost or stolen firearms must be entered into the National Crime Information Center database; and, 4) each incident must be entered into the Department's Internal Affairs database. Over the last 10 years, the BLM has reported one firearm as lost and seven as stolen. Six of these firearms were recovered. There is only one instance during that period in which a lost or stolen BLM firearm has been implicated in subsequent criminal activity. On June 27, 2015, a BLM officer's handgun was stolen from his personal vehicle in San Francisco, California. The theft was immediately reported in accordance with the BLM's policies and procedures. This gun was confirmed to be used in a shooting that occurred in San Francisco on July 1, 2015.

## **Conclusion**

The BLM's diverse mission creates unique challenges for our agency's law enforcement personnel, who work diligently to provide a safe environment for the public and employees and who deter, detect, and investigate illegal activities on our nation's public lands. The BLM takes its responsibility to control, secure, and safeguard the firearms our law enforcement officers use and encounter while carrying out their law enforcement responsibilities very seriously. We look

forward to working with the Committee on this important issue. Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony, and I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.