

STATEMENT OF THOMAS A. FRY, III
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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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Introduction

It is my honor to appear before the committee. As nominee to be Director of the Bureau of Land Management, I recognize the great responsibilities that go with this position. The BLM is the nation's largest land manager with a broad and complex mission. In managing the nation's public lands, we have responsibilities to all Americans who use them -- the rancher, the miner, the recreationist, the conservationist, and the taxpayer, to name but a few.

Most BLM-managed lands, as you know, are located in the West. These lands, whose rugged beauty and abundant resources stretch across millions of acres of wide open space, are essential to the West's appeal and lifestyle and to the country's economic well-being.

For these and other reasons, I believe passionately that the BLM is an agency poised on the brink of greatness. Although we are small, with only 8,700 full-time, permanent employees, we give tremendous value for 'the taxpayers' money. In fact, we manage 264 million acres of public land at a cost to the taxpayer of less than \$3 an acre per year.

What started out as "the lands nobody wanted" in our country's pioneer days today represent a priceless legacy and long-term investment for the American people. When the BLM first opened its doors more than 50 years ago, the agency focused primarily on a handful of programs: range, cadastral surveying, land and minerals. Those programs are still very important to us. However, today the BLM staff includes recreation specialists, wildlife biologists, paleontologists, and others who reflect the evolving needs and desires of our society. In today's fast-changing West, we need to be responsive to a widened array of demands associated with our multiple-use mission.

BLM: The Open Space Agency

Perhaps one of the most important roles we have now is that as the Nation's leading steward of open space. Communities across America recognize the problems associated with sprawl and the loss of open space. Nowhere is the pressure on open space more apparent than in the West,

where 11 Western States are among America's 15 fastest-growing States. The wide open spaces of the West can no longer be taken for granted, as two-thirds of the lands managed by the BLM are now within an hour's drive of urban areas. This close proximity of cities and suburbs to the public lands means that once-remote BLM lands are now the public's backyard. These wide open spaces are perhaps the signature element of the Western lifestyle and we at the BLM recognize our role in conserving this space.

Preserving open space is a bipartisan issue that transcends political boundaries. In Utah, State legislator Ralph Becker, a Democrat from Salt Lake City, framed the issue this way: "There's a saying that you don't miss the water until your well is dry. That can be said about open space. When it comes to open space, you only have one chance to do this right." Also in Utah, Kevin Garn, the House Majority Leader, sponsored the Utah Quality Growth Act of 1999. Garn, a Republican, said his bill was about "enhancing and preserving the quality of life that we have all grown to know and love in the State of Utah."

The BLM's multiple-use mandate makes us a leading player in the "sprawl" debate. Whatever the use or management responsibility -- whether oil and gas leasing, grazing, recreation, or conservation -- BLM-managed lands all help keep the wide open spaces just that. Throughout the West, you can find numerous examples where the BLM is working with communities and local citizens to help conserve these open spaces, yet create appropriate opportunities for economic development.

I'd like to give you a few examples of what we're doing:

National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska

In terms of managing for both conservation and development, we crafted - with extensive public input - a balanced plan for managing a portion of the 23 million-acre National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A), an area in the northern part of the State that is about the size of Indiana. The BLM completed an Integrated Activity Plan for 4.6 million acres in the northeast corner of the NPR-A, which is not only rich in oil and gas resources, but also provides critical habitat for caribou, waterfowl, raptors, and fish.

The BLM's challenge was to develop a plan that allows for oil and gas leasing while ensuring the protection of crucial habitat -- a critical, yet formidable, task.

How did we do it? By listening to all parties -- industry, environmental groups, the State, the borough, Native communities, and the public-at-large -- and then incorporating the knowledge and concerns we heard into the final plan.

The 18-month process tapped the scientific knowledge of four Federal agencies, the State of Alaska, the North Slope Borough, and the scientific community. We held 10 public hearings, a three-day science symposium in Anchorage, and two workshops.

More than 7,000 written comments later, what did we have? I believe we have a final plan that is a prime example of how to manage our Nation's public lands and resources. The plan

incorporated innovative approaches to wildlife and habitat protection while providing for the opportunity to develop oil and gas resources.

As for such development, the BLM in January authorized ARCO, Inc., to begin its winter exploration program on some of the leases it obtained from last May's lease sale in the NPR-A. This was the first oil and gas lease sale in the NPR-A since the early 1980s; the sale generated \$104.6 million in rentals and lease bonus bids.

ARCO is authorized to drill up to eight exploratory wells, although only two or three wells are expected to be completed this year before work ends in the spring. The BLM has also issued the necessary right-of-way permit and approved the company's application for permit to drill. No permanent roads or facilities will be constructed for this exploratory program and access will be by ice roads.

Our Activity Plan for managing the NPR-A marks a new means through which the Federal government can plan for the protection and use of its natural resources, including the environmentally sound development of coal, coalbed methane, natural gas, and oil. Our goal is to facilitate the maximum recovery of public land energy resources while protecting the environment. With the support of Congress, our agency will work to resolve lessee conflicts surrounding coalbed methane, whose production boom has reached an unprecedented rate.

Maricopa County, Arizona

Another management example involves Maricopa County, Arizona, which is within the fast-growing Phoenix metropolitan area. There is significant public land along the I-17 corridor, which - under an existing and outdated land-use plan - has been identified for disposal. This has generated concern across the political spectrum in the local community. Further, just five miles away, the Del Webb Corporation has begun construction of what will be the 50,000-person "Anthem" community. In response to this widely expressed community sentiment, the local BLM manager intends to update the local land-use plan to reflect current needs and anticipates that the land will be retained in public ownership as a guarantee of open space.

Washoe County, Nevada

In Washoe County, Nevada, the BLM is developing a joint Federal-county initiative that will update land-disposal plans to ensure that appropriate public land is retained in public ownership as open space. The BLM has participated in 17 Citizen Advisory Board meetings and will continue to work with local groups. We anticipate that decisions will address such issues as the management of off-highway vehicles, in cooperation with county law enforcement authorities.

This story of cooperation is being told and re-told in communities throughout the West where BLM-managed lands are the final frontier for open space. You will find examples in urban areas, such as Salt Lake City, Utah, and Boise, Idaho, and in non-urban areas, such as St. George, Utah, and Glenwood Springs, Colorado. We recognize the potential for success in land management is greater when solutions are pursued locally and cooperatively.

I should note that our efforts include assisting communities that want to provide for orderly development opportunities and enhanced community services. We continue to carry out actions that benefit localities under the Recreation and Public Purposes Act. Further, the Administration has endorsed S.1892, a bill introduced by Senators Domenici and Bingaman that will enable the Federal purchase of an outstanding property in New Mexico. The legislation will also allow the BLM to make full use of its authority to sell lands that are designated as suitable for disposal under our land-use plans.

National Monuments

I also believe that the BLM's new experience in National Monument management is consistent with our role as an open space agency. On January 11, the President signed proclamations establishing three new National Monuments and expanding an existing one. The newly designated areas, which were already on Federal land, are:

- the Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument in Arizona,
- the Agua Fria National Monument, also in Arizona,
- and the California Coastal National Monument.

The President also expanded the existing Pinnacles National Monument in California, which is under National Park Service management.

Acting on the recommendations of Secretary Babbitt and under the authority of the Antiquities Act of 1906, the President created the three new BLM National Monuments, which the BLM will manage or (in the case of Grand Canyon-Parashant) co-manage. We will be working closely with State and local communities to develop land-use plans for these areas -- both to ensure that

appropriate multiple uses continue and to preserve the Monuments' precious cultural, scenic, and wildlife resources for future generations. Throughout this process, we are committed to an ongoing dialogue with local communities and stakeholders, as occurred in developing the management plan for the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

I recognize the concerns that have been expressed about these designations. However, I believe they represent an opportunity for the BLM to demonstrate its proven ability to conserve resources while maintaining historical land uses. Further, as we have seen at Grand Staircase, there is an opportunity to achieve consensus built around a management approach that provides modest visitor facility development within these units and focuses potentially beneficial economic activity related to visitation on the surrounding communities. The BLM Monuments are envisioned as different from parks, in that while conservation is the key objective, many traditional uses normally included under the multiple-use mandate may continue. I am convinced that over time, this concept, implemented with cooperation between our managers and local communities, will prove its worth.

Land-Use Planning

All of the efforts I have described and, indeed, virtually every critical action taken by the BLM, depend on our ability to develop and maintain credible land-use plans. At this point, we face a formidable challenge to update our land-use planning base, which often does not reflect contemporary needs. In recent years, we have seen not only an unprecedented growth in recreation, but also a growing demand for natural gas, which has followed recent technological advances in exploration and production. One of my priorities as Director would be to bring our land-use planning base up-to-date so that we can make sound land-use planning decisions that accommodate all our public land users. I believe this is in everyone's interest, especially since 75 percent of the BLM's land-use plans are over 10 years old. Many people depend on the public lands to make a living - the rancher, the miner, and the oil or gas operator, to name only a few. Yet without long-term land-use planning that complies with all applicable laws and regulations, it is impossible for these stakeholders to plan ahead for their businesses. If we fail to do this, the BLM and our stakeholders will have to deal with instability and uncertainty, and perhaps ultimately face each other in the court room, which serves no one's interest.

Investing in the BLM

As I mentioned earlier, we are a small agency with only 8,700 permanent, full-time employees. As our workload has expanded, our land-management mission has become more challenging. Accordingly, we always seek ways to maximize our efficiency. Initiatives such as Service First, where we share facilities and resources with the Forest Service, have proven successful. But the time has come for the Nation to invest in the BLM - whose management generates benefits for all who use and enjoy the public lands.

The most important asset the BLM has is the land. I should add that our other leading asset is our workforce. I've been privileged to travel the length and breadth of the country seeing BLM employees in action. They are dedicated public servants who go the extra mile. I've seen them driving several hours before they even start their work day and end it long after the doors to our offices close. They are part of the community, contributing to all aspects of what makes particular cities and towns worthwhile places to live.

Conclusion

I began my remarks by highlighting the BLM's key role in the emerging issue of open space. I would like to conclude my testimony by reiterating my commitment to our agency's mission under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. The BLM's multiple-use mandate, which is frequently viewed as "difficult" or "impossible," is, from my standpoint, flexible - meaning, flexible in meeting the needs of the fast-growing, fast-changing West.

It's true that Congress has given us a demanding mission - but it's one we are confident we can carry out with the right tools to do the job. By fulfilling the mandate Congress has given us - that of accommodating multiple uses of the land while protecting its resources - the BLM will preserve wide open space, which is crucial to the quality of life, traditions, and lifestyles of Westerners.

Many of know that President Teddy Roosevelt told the nation nearly 75 years ago that our caring for the country's natural resources is "essentially democratic in spirit, purpose and method." Perhaps less well-known is that he also told Congress that "Optimism is a good characteristic, but if carried to an excess, it becomes foolishness. We are prone to speak of the resources of this country as inexhaustible; this is not so." I'm an optimistic person, but I know that the current resources of our agency are not inexhaustible either.

We are committed to working in partnership with you and the public, and we are confident that this spirit of cooperation will ensure good government and produce good results. Let me assure you that the BLM's cooperation starts right here with me at this table. By working together, we can keep the West we love a special place.

Thank you.