

**Statement of  
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Deputy Director, Operations  
Bureau of Land Management  
Senate Energy & Resources Committee  
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests  
Hearing on S. 1170, Fort Stanton-Snowy River National Cave Conservation Area Act  
July 20, 2005**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of S. 1170, the Fort Stanton-Snowy River National Cave Conservation Area Act. This new discovery is both exciting and awe-inspiring. Our responsibility, as emphasized in the legislation, is to protect the special scientific values of this new discovery. As Senator Domenici stated upon introduction of his legislation, this new discovery "can only be described as magnificent." We agree completely.

**Background**

The first documented exploration of the Fort Stanton Cave in south central New Mexico was in the mid-19th century, although there is evidence that native peoples previously explored its environs. This cave system has been extensively explored and is opened, on a permitted basis, to the public. Scout troops, amateur cavers (cave explorers) and the general public have explored this cave for years. Also, for many years volunteer groups of scientists, cavers and other professionals working in conjunction with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have been searching the Fort Stanton Cave system for additional passages that would expand the known cave system. In 2001, they confirmed a new passage into a previously unknown expansion of the cave system; public disclosure was delayed until just two months ago in order to ensure protection of the unique cave ecosystem. This initial discovery was spearheaded by BLM volunteers John Corcoran, Lloyd Swartz, John Mclean, Don Becker, and Andrew Grieco.

Following the discovery, a careful, systematic and scientific process of exploration of the expanded cave system began. Cavers have their own protocols to assure documented and scientific exploration of virgin passages. The first rule is to do no harm and proceed with caution. On discovery of a new extraordinary expansion of the cave system complex, while human instinct would compel us to charge forward, for cavers the imperative is to stop. Caves are fragile ecosystems and their wonders can be easily and unintentionally destroyed. Fighting against human instinct, they stopped and they studied before they proceeded. The rewards they have reaped have been numerous.

As they began their systematic and scientific search of the cave, they were careful to keep all contact with the non-cave world at bay. Entering the Snowy River Cave complex involves a 600-yard crawl through spaces no larger than 10 inches high. Upon arrival, all dirty clothes are changed and clean jumpsuits and shoes are then worn. No outside substances are brought into the cave and airflow is restricted so as not to contaminate or depressurize the cave environment.

Exploration of the Snowy River complex will be a slow and thoughtful process. The complex includes "Snowy River" of calcium carbonate (calcite) that runs at least two miles through the base of the cave. To our knowledge, this is a unique phenomenon probably caused by an ancient slow moving river which over centuries dissolved the calcite from the surrounding stone and re-deposited it as a snowy carpet down the length of the cave.

We are making additional exceptional discoveries throughout the cave. The BLM is partnering with the caving community, scientific community, and local universities to ensure that the cave's mysteries and resources are properly treated, studied and analyzed. Dr. Penny Boston, the Director of the Cave and Karst Studies program at New Mexico Tech indicates that 16 organisms have been isolated to date from the cave that are unique and may exist nowhere else in the world. These organisms appear to survive by eating rock. This discovery lends itself to possible practical applications in the field of pharmaceuticals.

The BLM is committed to continuing these and other partnerships to explore fully the Snowy River Cave system. To date, over two miles of the system has been mapped. The full extent of the system has not been determined, but the scientists and cavers tell us that they expect many more miles of cave passages are left to be explored. In addition, there are also numerous other caves within the Fort Stanton area which contain significant cultural resources now under study.

### **S. 1170**

The legislation before the Committee today would create the first conservation area dedicated to protecting cave resources. Its goal is to "secure, protect, and conserve" the Fort Stanton-Snowy River cave system. We strongly support those goals and the legislation to implement them. We would like the opportunity to work with Senators Domenici and Bingaman and the Committee staff to modify S. 1170 to improve management of the area to offer a number of technical refinements of the bill.

Each of the National Conservation Areas (NCAs) designated by Congress and managed by the BLM is unique. However, for the most part they have certain critical elements, these include: public land, mining, and mineral leasing law withdrawal, OHV use limitations, and language which charges the Secretary to allow only those uses that further the purposes for which the NCA is established. Furthermore, NCA proposals do not diminish the protections that currently apply to the lands. The Fort Stanton-Snowy River NCA proposal largely honors this spirit and we would like the opportunity to work with the sponsors to further develop appropriate protections.

This NCA proposal is unique because of the unusual subterranean nature of the lands to be protected. Because the area is located within the old Fort Stanton military reservation (withdrawal revoked in 1956) the BLM already has some protections in place. It lies within both the Fort Stanton Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and the 24,000 acre Fort Stanton Recreation Area. The current uses of the area which are largely recreational are compatible with the protections envisioned by the legislation.

At the same time, the world class nature of this discovery demands further protections as noted in S. 1170. We would like to work with the Committee to further clarify those protections and the area to be covered. Inclusion of surface as well as subsurface is important. While in many places the cave system is 60 to 100 feet below the ground, in other places tree roots have been observed suggesting a close proximity to the surface. Some surface activities could affect the cave environment if safeguards are not in place. We believe it is important to draw some line around the area. Initial estimates are that an area of about 10,000 acres would likely cover the entire cave system which includes other significant caves. The establishment of this NCA would be consistent with the current uses of the area.

### **Conclusion**

We want to express our deep appreciation to Senators Domenici and Bingaman for introducing this legislation to protect the important cave resources of the Fort Stanton and Snowy River Cave system. These are important resources-- scientifically and educationally. We look forward to working cooperatively both with Congress and our many partners to see this vision become a reality.