

Statement of Robert V. Abbey
Nominee for Director, Bureau of Land Management
Before the
U. S. Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
July 9, 2009

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Senator Murkowski, and Members of this Committee. I am truly honored that President Obama and Secretary Salazar have demonstrated their confidence in me by nominating me to lead the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) during this time of unprecedented social, economic, environmental and cultural changes. It would be a great privilege to serve my country as the next BLM director. If confirmed, I pledge to work closely with the Secretary, with Members of Congress, and most importantly, with public land stakeholders, to manage the public's land and mineral resources.

My career in natural resource management began shortly after graduating from the University of Southern Mississippi in 1973. I worked for the Mississippi State Park system for over four years before accepting a position with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at the Waterways Experiment Station in Vicksburg. It was while I was with the Corps of Engineers that I first interacted with the BLM. I was intrigued by the BLM's congressional mandate to manage public lands for multiple uses but I was more impressed by the diversity of resources and landscapes managed by the agency. It was for this reason that I applied for a job with the BLM and in 1980, I was selected for a position in the BLM's Casper, Wyoming District office. I spent 25 years serving the public as an employee with the BLM, working in Wyoming, Arizona, Washington, D.C., Mississippi, Colorado, and Nevada. Our family moved so often that my wife still thinks BLM stands for "better like moving." I was fortunate to work with many dedicated BLM employees at each location and I learned much from my interaction with them. I have also been blessed with opportunities to work with outstanding members of the public, many of whom are just as passionate about and dedicated to proper management of public land as BLM employees. I am grateful for the support and assistance I received during my career in public service. I understand my nomination has been supported by a diverse group of public land stakeholders and I am proud of this fact.

Managing the National System of Public Lands for multiple uses is not easy by any means. Over time, we have allowed differences of opinions regarding the management of these assets to create divisiveness among public land stakeholders and special interest groups. It is past time that we take action to address the strained relationships and the mistrust that is so prevalent among many groups. Acknowledging that many stakeholders have valid reasons for some of their differences, I know from working in the field that we actually have much in common. We all want public lands to be managed in a manner that will provide for clean water and air and a healthy environment for plants, animals, and people. We want productive and sustainable ecosystems. We want available energy resources, both renewable and non-renewable, to be developed responsibly and in a manner that will help us achieve our national goals of reducing the impacts of climate change, carbon emissions, and reliance on foreign oil. We support opportunities to use public lands for recreational pursuits and in a manner that helps sustain communities and local economies. And, most of us want the BLM to place as much value on our

nation's wilderness and cultural resources as we do on mineral exploration and development. I believe we can achieve our common goals and better serve the public by working together while we continue our discussion on issues where we might disagree.

Even though I am optimistic about the future of our nation's public lands, I know full well that many challenges lie ahead. For example, of special concerns today are wildfires, a changing water and land base, impacts to public lands caused by irresponsible users, and the spread of invasive species. While these issues are daunting and significant in their own right, I am just as concerned about addressing internal issues within the BLM itself. If we are to manage public lands for the benefit of our nation and continue to provide the services the public expects, demands, and deserves, then we will need to create greater efficiencies within the agency's administrative processes so employees are freed to do their jobs.

Both the public and BLM employees deserve a more effective organization than exists today. Change begins at the top, and I am proud to see President Obama and Secretary Salazar, with Members of Congress, working to establish a public land agenda that, if met, will help us leave future generations with an environmental legacy that will make us proud. If confirmed, I will be a "hands-on" director and will ensure that BLM leaders "lead" and managers "manage," helping to ensure that important decisions are reached based on the best available information and in a timely manner. We will work closely with local, state, tribal, and other federal agencies as we do our very best to meet management goals and the public's expectations.

Given the BLM's aging workforce and the need to replace experienced personnel, we will bring into the organization fresh, intelligent, and gifted leadership and use the strategic hiring of personnel as an opportunity to make positive statements both to employees and the public. If confirmed, I will surround myself with self starters who understand and support the BLM's multiple use mission and who are open to receiving advice and counsel from the public. Working with Secretary Salazar and his leadership team, we will build an organization where actions reflect rhetoric and we can once again earn the public's trust.

I share this information with the Committee today because I want you all to know that much needs to be done to improve the overall performance of the BLM in order to make it the premiere natural resource agency that I believe it is capable of becoming. As I mentioned earlier in my statement, I spent 25 years as an employee of the BLM and I take great pride in the work that we, as an agency, accomplished during that period. For almost 4 years now, I have worked as a natural resource consultant in the private sector. I have gained a different perspective of our natural resource agencies and their processes during this period and I believe this recent experience in the private sector will help me be a better agency administrator.

Mr. Chairman, if confirmed, it will be my goal to move aggressively in managing BLM programs to help meet the energy, mineral, and recreational needs of our nation while at the same time, assuring the sustainability and ecological health of our nation's most precious cultural and natural resources.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today and I stand ready to answer any questions you may have.