

**Statement of  
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Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining**

**Hearing on “*Collaborative Initiatives: Restoring Watersheds and Large Landscapes Across Boundaries Through State and Federal Partnerships*”**

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Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) efforts to advance on-the-ground landscape restoration and conservation of natural and cultural resources through collaborative partnerships. The BLM is proud to partner with States, local governments, counties, Tribes, and other organizations, and we are committed to advancing the important public access and recreation goals outlined by Secretary Zinke in Secretarial Order 3347, *Conservation Stewardship and Outdoor Recreation*. The relationships we build with our partners are critical to our ability to successfully manage the vast public lands and the diverse uses they offer. Frequent communication and close collaboration are hallmarks of the BLM’s work across the West. This approach is essential for the Federal government to be a good neighbor to and steward for local communities and is critically important for solving management challenges across jurisdictional boundaries, leveraging resources, creating new economic opportunities for local businesses, and enhancing the enjoyment and use of America’s public lands.

**Background**

The BLM manages over 245 million acres of surface land and 700 million acres of subsurface mineral estate on behalf of the American people. Managing this vast portfolio is a tremendous honor for the employees of the BLM, and our work depends on close cooperative relationships with partners and local communities. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) sets forth the BLM’s multiple-use mission, directing that public lands be managed for a variety of uses, such as conventional and renewable energy development, livestock grazing, conservation, mining, watershed protection, hunting, fishing, and other forms of recreation, and requires that various resources be managed on a sustained yield basis. Because of this, Federal lands support the production of goods and services that create jobs and promote economic development in communities across the nation.

BLM partnerships are truly cross-cutting, occurring at all levels of the agency and in key program areas, such as recreation, fire management, and conservation of fish, wildlife, and cultural resources. The BLM’s great array of partners – from national organizations, Tribes, community associations, and volunteers to schools and educational institutions, friends groups, youth corps organizations, businesses, and other government agencies – provide invaluable support, helping the agency deliver opportunities to engage the public in conserving, enjoying,

and appropriately using the unique resources and services provided by BLM-managed lands. These partnerships have been particularly effective in efforts to restore ecosystems and landscapes, control the spread of invasive species, reduce wildfire risk, and enhance conservation and recreational opportunities.

### **Ecosystem & Landscape Restoration**

BLM-managed public lands encompass an incredible number of unique ecosystems, from the sagebrush-steppe rangelands of the Great Basin region to the high mesas, deep canyons, and spectacular arches and spires of Utah's San Rafael Swell to the glacier carved gorges of Oregon's high desert. These lands provide forage for livestock, habitat for threatened and endangered species of fish, wildlife, and plants, harvestable forest products, subsistence use of fish and game in Alaska, and rewarding opportunities for all types of outdoor recreation. To ensure that these valuable ecological goods and services are preserved for the benefit of present and future generations, the BLM strongly supports locally-driven ecosystem restoration efforts and regularly partners with State and local governments, other Federal agencies, and academic institutions to improve the resilience of human communities living near and working on BLM-managed lands.

For example, the Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI) is a partnership between the BLM, the State of Utah, the U.S. Natural Resource Conservation Service, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), hunting and fishing groups, private landowners, oil and gas companies, private foundations, and public land grazers that aims to improve the health of high priority watersheds. The WRI is a bottom-up initiative, where locally developed regional teams plan, rank, and assist in the implementation of projects to improve water quality and quantity, reduce catastrophic wildfire risk, develop sustainable agriculture, and improve forage and wildlife habitat. The BLM, State of Utah, and other partners have provided millions of dollars in funding to accomplish on-the-ground work for projects that provide the most value to local communities. Since 2006, over 1,800 projects have been completed or are currently in progress, which have treated approximately 1.6 million acres and restored over 400 miles of streams to proper functioning condition. Notable recent projects include removal of pinyon pine and juniper, installation of a poly tank guzzler system, and hazardous fuel reduction to improve Greater Sage-Grouse, mule deer, elk, and pronghorn habitat and ranges. In addition, the BLM has worked with the State of New Mexico, ranchers, industry, and other local partners on the successful "Restore New Mexico" initiative, which has restored over 3 million acres of grasslands, woodlands, and riparian areas across the State that had been degraded by invasive species and woodland encroachment. This initiative also includes the reclamation of oil and gas legacy roads, pads, and other infrastructure that is no longer needed, which improves habitat for sensitive species of wildlife and plants.

In addition to our work to improve watersheds and landscapes in Utah and New Mexico, the BLM has also established partnerships to enhance fish and wildlife habitat. For example, the BLM, in coordination with Arizona's Lake Havasu Fishery Partnership, has helped treat more than 800 acres to improve habitat for fish and install shoreline fishing facilities. As a result of these efforts, Lake Havasu has become a premier fishing lake, contributing significantly to the local economy. Similarly, the BLM has partnered with the Nevada Departments of Wildlife and Conservation and Natural Resources, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the

Newmont Mining Corporation on a sagebrush ecosystem conservation program for managing over 1.5 million acres of habitat. A first of its kind in the United States for its scope and scale, the agreement establishes a framework governing Newmont's management of sagebrush habitat. As with the agency's work in Arizona and Nevada, the BLM has partnered with the Wyoming Game and Fish and Agriculture Departments, the Southwest Wyoming County Commissions, the Southwest Wyoming Conservation Districts, and a number of other Federal agencies and organizations as part of the Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative (WLCI). The WLCI is a long-term, science-based collaborative effort to assess and enhance aquatic and terrestrial habitats at a landscape scale in southwest Wyoming, while facilitating responsible development in some of the country's most abundant oil and natural gas reserves.

The BLM's partnerships have also resulted in improvements to subsistence resources and wildlife conservation. In Alaska, the BLM has worked with the State Department of Fish and Game to monitor Chinook salmon abundance in the Unalakleet River as well as caribou, moose, Dall sheep, and other big game species in multiple populations throughout the State. The BLM contributes funding to the State and also participates in its surveys. This partnership ensures that consistent data collection methods are used to produce accurate demographic information, which is then used to make well-informed decisions on subsistence, sport hunting, and habitat management. In Wyoming, the BLM has partnered with State and local governments, other Federal agencies, and a large number of nonprofit organizations and foundations as part of the Wyoming Migration Initiative, which facilitates the study of big game migration across landscapes. The Red Desert to Hoback migration assessment, being conducted as part of this initiative, aims to identify potential risks to migrating mule deer and to provide a roadmap for stakeholders to improve management and conservation efforts.

### **Invasive Species Management & Wildfire Risk Reduction**

Invasive species reduce rangeland productivity, increase the risk of catastrophic wildfire, threaten native plant and wildlife populations and their habitats, and negatively impact recreational opportunities on public lands. The BLM is committed to preventing the introduction and spread of invasive species that threaten local and State economies, the environment, and in some cases human health directly. Many invasive plants, insects, and other types of animals, pathogens, and parasites are already well-established within the United States, and noxious weeds like cheatgrass and salt cedar exist on over 79 million acres of BLM-managed lands, requiring significant effort to control. Changes in land uses and prolonged drought are rendering some habitats, including some of the best-protected, most valuable, and remote natural areas more susceptible to biological invasion. For example, the Great Basin's sagebrush-steppe ecosystem is one of the most imperiled in the United States due in part to the presence of invasive species such as cheatgrass and medusahead. Together, invasive species and the effects of prolonged drought are creating conditions that are leading to larger, more frequent, and more intense rangeland fires across the Great Basin.

Cheatgrass is a non-native annual grass that dries early in the summer and remains highly flammable throughout the fire season, creating dangerous fuel-loading conditions on the ground. A wind-driven rangeland fire in cheatgrass can easily burn thousands of acres in an hour, destroying homes, livelihoods, and habitat. If left unchecked, cheatgrass can invade sagebrush communities after rangeland fires, creating conditions for more frequent, intense fires in the

future. Native plant and animal communities are not well-adapted to these novel fire regimes and can suffer significant declines in numbers and cover. This in turn allows for more cheatgrass growth in following years. For these reasons, this “fire-and-cheatgrass cycle” is a particularly difficult challenge for land managers.

Healthy rangelands are more resistant to certain invasive species. Therefore, working to maintain rangeland plant community integrity and – when necessary – stabilizing and restoring areas after fire is critical to successfully breaking the cheatgrass-fire cycle. The increasing frequency and intensity of rangeland fires and the conversion of sagebrush to invasive annual grasses pose major threats to native biodiversity, ranchers, Tribes, local communities, outdoor recreationists, energy developers, and others who depend on these lands and resources to sustain their livelihoods and quality of life.

The formidable challenges posed by invasive species must be addressed for the BLM and our partners to effectively protect and preserve natural, cultural, historic, and tribal resources; safeguard traditional uses of public lands; facilitate new economic opportunities; and build ecological resilience of plant and animal communities. Just as with our efforts to restore landscapes, the BLM actively partners with State and Federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, industry, and academic institutions to reduce the spread of invasive species through prevention, early detection and rapid response, and control.

With the limited success of traditional mechanical and chemical efforts to treat annual grass invasion over the past 50 years, the BLM is working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Agricultural Research Service, USFWS, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and other partners on a new tool to manage these invasive grasses – a naturally occurring weed-suppressing bacteria, *Pseudomonas fluorescens* – to be used as a host-specific biopesticide. Field trials were initiated in 2015 at the Mid-Columbia National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Washington State to test the bacteria’s efficacy.

In addition, after the 2013 Yarnell Hill Fire in Arizona, the BLM partnered with Arizona State Forestry and the USFS to provide funding to local fire districts for hazardous fuel reduction projects, including vegetation removal and thinning. This significant regional partnership has funded 16 projects in 13 communities throughout Arizona, treating over 1,300 acres. Similarly, the BLM has partnered with the State of Montana, private landowners, and other Federal agencies as part of the Blackfoot Challenge. This partnership aims to enhance, conserve, and protect the natural resources and rural lifestyles of the Blackfoot River Valley through cost-share initiatives, including reduction of hazardous fuels around residences and conflicts between humans and livestock with carnivores like grizzly bears and wolves. The BLM has also partnered with State, Federal, and local stakeholders as part of the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative (HCWC) in Oregon. The HCWC aims to reach consensus on specific, achievable, tangible, and measurable steps to reduce the potential for and impact of mega-fires in Harney County, including coordinating wildfire suppression activities, preventative measures to reduce the size of wildland fires on public and private lands, and rehabilitation actions.

Concurrent with the BLM’s work with partners on wildfire risk reduction, the BLM has collaborated with a wide variety of State and local groups on a number of general invasive

species management projects. For example, the BLM in Colorado has worked with The Nature Conservancy, the San Miguel County Weed Board, and other interested stakeholders since 2001 to remove over 30 miles of salt cedar and restore native vegetation along the San Miguel River.

Finally, the BLM has partnered with State and local governments, other Federal agencies, Tribes, individuals, and other organizations in 75 Cooperative Weed Management Areas (CWMAs) across the West. CWMAs help interested parties coordinate efforts and share expertise for managing invasive species in a defined area. By addressing invasive species in this manner, the BLM is able to leverage limited resources to counter the impacts of invasive species across the landscape.

### **Conservation & Recreation**

As part of its multiple use mission, the BLM, in conjunction with strong local partnerships, conserves, protects, and restores nationally significant landscapes that are recognized for their outstanding cultural, ecological, and scientific values. These landscapes are part of an active, vibrant landscape where people live, work, and explore. They offer exceptional opportunities for recreation, solitude, wildlife viewing, history exploration, scientific research, and a wide range of traditional uses.

In Colorado, for example, the BLM has partnered with the State Department of Parks and Wildlife to manage the land, plants, and wildlife of the Black Ridge Canyons Wilderness Area within the McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area. This partnership has resulted in management strategies within the wilderness aimed at reducing the threat of wildfire to bighorn sheep habitat and vegetation composition. Likewise, the BLM in California partnered with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation in 2016 on the acquisition of approximately 350 acres of land for the Cache Creek Natural Area. The acquisition of this land secured and improved year-round public access and provided multiple recreational opportunities for camping, hunting, angling, and birdwatching, while protecting important cultural, natural resources, and wildlife habitat for the rare Tule elk. California's Tule elk herds have recovered from the brink of extinction, and Cache Creek now has several trophy bull tags available each year. One of the tags is reserved for an "apprentice hunt" for youth hunters.

The BLM also manages public lands to facilitate outdoor recreation. Visitors to these lands enjoy countless types of outdoor adventure – participating in activities as widely varied as camping, hunting, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, boating, whitewater rafting, hang-gliding, off-highway vehicle driving, mountain biking, birding and wildlife viewing, photography, climbing, all types of winter sports, and visiting natural and cultural heritage sites. Recreational experiences are especially important in the growing West, where more than half of BLM-managed public lands are within 25 miles of an urban area. Lands used for recreational activities contribute significantly to local economies. As Secretary Zinke has said, "Outdoor recreation is about both our heritage and our economy." Lands managed by the BLM and other Department bureaus hosted an estimated 473 million recreation visitors during 2016. These visits alone contributed an estimated \$50 billion to the economy and supported nearly 426,000 jobs nationwide.

As with other uses, outdoor recreation on BLM-managed public lands is enhanced by collaborative partnerships with local organizations. For example, the BLM in Nevada has partnered with the State Division of State Parks, the City of Caliente, Lincoln County, the International Mountain Bicycling Association, and the American Conservation Experience to develop and build the Lincoln County Partners Multi-Purpose Non-Motorized Trail System, a network of multi-purpose, non-motorized recreational trails suitable for hiking and mountain biking. Phase 1 of the project, now underway, includes constructing 40 miles of interconnected trails – 27 miles on public lands and 13 miles on state park lands. The City of Caliente will build an additional five miles of trails and a bike park on city property. In addition to this work, the BLM in Idaho has partnered with the City of Boise, Ada County, the State Department of Fish and Game, and the USFS to manage recreational, open space, and natural resources in the foothills immediately adjacent to Boise. This partnership, known as “Ridge to Rivers,” manages and maintains more than 200 miles of motorized and non-motorized trails (46 miles of trail on BLM-managed public lands) and 22 developed trailheads within the 15,000-acre Boise Front Special Recreation Management Area. The partners all contribute funds to meet these needs, with the City of Boise serving as the lead agency. The BLM contributes resources to maintain and improve existing trails, replace aging equipment, and assist with implementing local planning efforts for the trail system.

### **Conclusion**

The BLM has a track record of developing robust partnerships with State and county governments, area Tribes, the public, and other stakeholders to make land management more effective and responsive to the needs of local communities while maintaining our Federal trust resource responsibilities. That said, we know there are ways to further improve our work. The BLM looks forward to working with the Subcommittee and Congress 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.