

**Testimony of
Shawn Bolton
Commissioner, Rio Blanco County, Colorado**

**Before the
House Natural Resources Committee,
Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources**

**“Effect of the President’s FY2012 Budget and Legislative Proposals for the
Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service’s Energy and
Minerals Program on Private Sector Job Creation, Domestic Energy and Minerals
Production and Deficit Reduction”**

April 5, 2011

Mr. Chairman — thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. Rio Blanco County is a rural county in northwestern Colorado with a population of about 6,000 people. Seventy-five percent of the county consists of federally managed lands, with about two-thirds BLM lands and one-third National Forests, including parts of the White River and Routt National Forests.

In addition to serving as commissioner, I am the CEO of Bolton Fencing & Construction LLC, a small business that provides full service construction services to the oil and natural gas industry, from well pad and road construction to pipelines and reclamation. I employ 50 people to 80 in the high season. My small business is like many that support the oil and gas industry, in that we provide good, high paying jobs in rural counties across Colorado and the West and are the economic engines for our communities.

Rio Blanco County gets about 90% of our tax assessment from the oil and gas industry and 75% of property taxes are from oil and gas. Over one third of all jobs in the county are directly related to the oil and gas industry. Given the large amount of federal land and the high proportion of our tax base from oil and gas, the energy programs of the BLM and the Forest Service have a huge impact on job creation and government revenue in my county. When federal policies constrain leasing, permitting, and project approvals, it directly impacts my small business and my county.

I have noticed in my county over the last several years that more and more decision making is being done in Washington. Rather than the practical, on-the-ground approach by land managers who understand the lands and their natural resource values as well as the local economic and social factors in Rio Blanco County, distant federal agencies in Washington are imposing a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead of listening to local communities and the businesses like mine who support them, Washington seems driven by an environmental lobby that gives exclusive preference to removing more lands from environmentally responsible multiple, productive uses, and locking them away for passive recreation purposes only.

I am particularly concerned about the new wild lands policy. We have already seen a situation where an 800 acre parcel was removed from a lease sale because it supposedly met wild lands criteria. Just because an environmental group proposes an area as wilderness doesn’t mean it meets the criteria. I urge Congress to defund implementation of the wild lands policy and pass

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legislation that prevents the Interior Department from unilaterally taking lands away from multiple use and managing them as de facto wilderness without a Congressional wilderness designation. There is already a process in place through the Federal Land Policy Management Act (FLPMA) to identify wilderness characteristics lands, areas of critical environmental concern (ACEC), special recreation management areas, and other special designations to protect resource values on BLM lands through the Resource Management Planning (RMP) process. In fact, the White River Field Office which includes most of Rio Blanco County is currently updating its RMP, and the county is participating as a cooperating agency. Wilderness characteristics areas can be identified as part of that process, but then subject to the scrutiny of local representatives such as myself. I would urge BLM to weigh the input of cooperators and the public in Rio Blanco County more heavily than the form letters organized by environmental groups from people across the country who are not directly impacted by the decisions made in these planning documents, and whose livelihoods and communities are not affected.

Increased state and federal regulation and the corresponding uncertainty has caused activity in Rio Blanco County and throughout the Piceance Basin in western Colorado to plummet. While low natural prices affect the entire country, activity in the Piceance Basin has been slower to rebound because of the added costs of regulation. When the federal government adds in further regulation that slows leasing, environmental analyses required for oil and gas project approvals and permitting, the costs become too great in our county and region, and the break even price means that producers will go elsewhere to lower cost regions of the country that don't have the additional regulatory burden of federal lands.

Ultimately, this affects the budget of BLM, as less activity on public lands means less revenue to the federal government. I urge this committee to consider the negative impact of BLM's budget, which imposes more costs through new fees and new regulations which will ultimately result in less economic activity and jobs in my county and less revenue to the federal government as oil and gas activity is driven to other areas of the country without federal public lands.

I look forward to addressing any questions or comments the Committee may have. Thank you Mr. Chairman for your time today.

Commissioner Shawn Bolton
Rio Blanco County, Colorado