

Lesley Robinson
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Testimony on “The Impact of the Administration’s Wild Land Order on Jobs and Economic Growth”

Chairman Hastings, Ranking Member Markey and members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Montana Association of Counties and Phillips County Montana on “The Impacts of the Administration’s Wild Lands Order on Jobs and Economic Growth’.

I am Lesley Robinson, Chairman of the Montana Association of Counties Public Lands Committee and a Commissioner from Phillips County. I also serve as Chairman of the National Association of Counties (NACo) Federal Land Management subcommittee and serve on the NACo Western Interstate Region Board.

Phillips County spans 5,213 square miles. We have approximately 4,000 people and 51,000 cattle in our county. 98% of Phillips County’s 3.2 million acres is classified as agriculture land. Approximately 1.1 million acres is BLM and 1.5 million is private land. Phillips County’s economy is dependent on Agriculture and Natural Gas production. 2008 Montana Agricultural Statistics state cash sales of agricultural commodities for Phillips County was eighty seven million dollars excluding government payments. These raw agricultural commodities are further processed and transported to other regions of the US and world generating four hundred and thirty four million dollars in commerce. Based on annual consumption levels Phillips County produces enough beef to feed two hundred and eighty thousand people and enough wheat to feed 1.4 million people.

Four of the top fifteen taxpayers in Phillips County are gas companies. Direct employment from gas production in Phillips County results in 100 full time jobs. The natural gas produced annually is enough gas to heat forty eight thousand homes. The active management of Public Lands is essential to the economy of our community. We strongly oppose federal land management agency actions that limit access and multiple use of lands that would be available to the public. As the US economy continues to recover, access to public lands is necessary to provide food and fuel to the American people.

Phillips County is in the heart of the 2.5 million acres referred to in the Department of Interior’s leaked memo as possible National Monument Designations under the Antiquities Act. We are referred to as some of the largest unplowed areas of the grasslands in the world and some of the best wildlife habitat regions in all the Great Plains. I am a fourth generation Phillips County rancher. The people of Phillips County have protected these lands and the wildlife for over 100 years.

We found a way to stimulate the economy in our community. We invited BLM director Robert Abbey, author of the leaked memo to Malta to hear our concerns. The local gymnasium had close to 2,000 people from all over the state of Montana there to listen and voice their concerns opposing designating a monument. The meeting broadcasted live on our local radio station and the radios website. If the committee is interested in a DVD or CD of the meeting it is available. Even though the land referred to in the leaked memo only affected two counties the rest of the state understood the impacts to everyone if this land was designated a monument.

Special designation such as Wild Lands historically creates more restrictions on the land. This leads to the loss of families in our community. If even one ranch or gas company family leaves the county due to increased restrictions it will have a noticeable negative impact to our economy due to loss of income and fewer volunteers. Our ambulance, fire departments and several other local services are run by volunteers.

I have a real concern with the growing trend of the current administration toward land designations developed in DC. Local economies suffer from top down land use decisions. Only Congress has the authority to designate lands as wilderness but yet Wild Lands is a designation not subject to Congressional approval. The first stop should be at the local level. I'm not referring to the local BLM office. Counties should be fully involved in the drafting and development of any proposal impacting lands within the counties jurisdiction. The leaked memo does not mention once coordinating or cooperating with local governments. Secretarial Order 3310 undermines the established public process for land use planning.

Last November I was invited by the BLM to participate in the National Landscape Conservation Summit in Las Vegas, Nevada. We spent two days discussing the BLM's land management. Secretary Salazar and BLM Director Robert Abbey both spoke to us at the conference. I do not remember once hearing Wild Lands mentioned. One month later Secretary Salazar and Director Abbey announced the Wild Lands directive.

There is a push to substantially increase funding for federal land acquisitions. Phillips County has over a million acres of BLM land that we receive PILT payments for. These payments don't fully replace tax revenues collected by private land owners. Increased ownership of land by the Federal Government would put a burden on the county and the country.

We support the National Monument Designation Transparency and Accountability Act, which recognizes the role of local county governments in the designation of national monuments and ensures review by local elected officials.

In conclusion I would just like to reiterate that any decisions to change uses on public land impacts local economies and the economy of the United States.