

**Statement of
John F. Ruhs
State Director, Nevada
Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Department of Interior
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
*“Improving Federal Land Management and Use to Better Serve Las Vegas Valley
Communities”***

July 26, 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM’s) management of public lands in southern Nevada, which contributes to local economic development while protecting the natural and cultural resources that Nevadans cherish. Under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the BLM is committed to providing robust opportunities for states, Tribes, and the public to be part of managing these incredible desert landscapes for a broad range of multiple uses in ways that support Nevada communities.

Background

The BLM manages one out of every ten acres in the United States and 30 percent of the nation’s minerals. In the State of Nevada, BLM-managed public lands make up approximately 63 percent of the State’s land base. The BLM manages this vast portfolio of public lands under the dual framework of multiple use and sustained yield. This means that the BLM manages public lands for a broad range of uses, including renewable and conventional energy development, livestock grazing, conservation, mining, watershed protection, hunting, fishing, and recreation. In so doing, public lands support the production of goods and services that create jobs and promote economic development in communities both in Nevada and across the nation.

Managing America’s public lands is a tremendous honor for the BLM, and our work depends on close cooperative relationships with partners and local communities. To ensure the best balance of uses and resource protections for public lands, the BLM undertakes extensive land use planning through a collaborative approach with local, state and tribal governments, the public, and stakeholder groups. In southern Nevada, this planning process – working in conjunction with the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act of 1998 (SNPLMA, Public Law 105-263) – has facilitated crucial economic development, new employment opportunities, and conservation of public land resources.

Public Land Management in the Las Vegas Valley

The Las Vegas Valley is home to nearly 2 million people, the famous Las Vegas Strip, spectacular desert landscapes, and historic, cultural, and paleontological treasures. Balancing the protection of these important natural, cultural, and scientific resources with economic development and growth is a challenge embraced by the BLM. In order to take advantage of the latest data and information about these public land resources, the BLM’s Las Vegas and Pahrump Field Offices are currently conducting a revision of the 1998 Las Vegas Resource

Management Plan (RMP). The planning area is located in southern Nevada and includes public lands managed by the Las Vegas Field Office within Clark County (except Red Rock Canyon and Sloan Canyon National Conservation Areas) and public lands managed by the Pahrump Field Office in southern Nye County, outside the Air Force's Nellis Test and Training Range. The RMP will provide the framework to guide decisions for every action and approved use within the planning area.

The BLM is committed to public engagement and working with cooperating governments and agencies as part of this planning process. As part of this commitment, the BLM has held numerous meetings to discuss topics of importance with the State of Nevada, local counties and municipalities, area Tribes, stakeholders, and Federal partners, and has provided opportunities for public input into the plan. The BLM signed Memoranda of Understanding with 19 cooperating agencies, including other Federal agencies and State, local, and tribal governments. The cooperating agencies play a vital role in this planning process by attending meetings, providing data and general information, conducting peer reviews, and assisting with the development of resource management alternatives. The BLM coordinates closely with cooperating agencies to accommodate their views and address any concerns with the RMP.

On October 17, 2014, the BLM released a draft RMP and associated Environmental Impact Statement (Draft RMP/EIS) for a 90-day public review and comment period. The following month, the BLM held a series of public meetings in several communities to answer specific questions and provide additional options for public input. The BLM later extended the comment period by an additional 60 days – for a total of 150 days – to ensure full public opportunity to comment.

Public comments received on the Draft RMP/EIS covered a wide spectrum of thoughts, opinions, ideas, and concerns. The BLM received almost 24,000 form letters from 17 separate organizations and groups, most of which were identical to the master letter. Of the more than 600 unique submissions that the BLM received, almost 150 contained substantive comments. Comments provided input on lands with wilderness characteristics, wild horses and burros, solar energy development, land disposals, recreation, and conservation. The BLM recognizes that the public invested considerable time and effort to submit comments on the Draft RMP/EIS, and we developed a systematic process to ensure that all substantive comments were tracked and considered. A Comment Analysis Report will be provided as part of the Proposed RMP/Final EIS.

The Proposed RMP/Final EIS is currently being drafted. Once completed, the Proposed RMP/Final EIS will be released for a formal 30-day protest period and a 60-day Governor's Consistency Review.

Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act of 1998

The Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act (SNPLMA, Public Law 105-263) was designed by Congress to provide for the responsible disposal of BLM-managed public land within the Las Vegas Valley. Since enactment in 1998, Congress has amended SNPLMA eight times to expand the program to rural communities, to protect communities from wildfire, and to focus on landscape-level restoration on public lands. Under the Act, funds generated from the

sale of these lands are deposited into a special account to be expended consistent with the provisions of the Act. Funds from SNPLMA lands sales have been used for a variety of purposes as stipulated by the Act, including acquisition of high value environmentally-sensitive lands; establishment of parks, trails, and natural areas; creation of new conservation initiatives; and a number of other projects.

Land Disposal

SNPLMA authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to make lands available for disposal, within the congressionally-designated disposal boundary. Under this framework, the BLM's SNPLMA Program works with local governments to jointly identify parcels for sale within the congressional disposal boundary. These lands are then offered for sale at fair market value. To date, 30,064 acres have been sold out of Federal ownership under the provisions of SNPLMA, and another approximately 31,380 acres remain eligible for sale under SNPLMA.

In addition, the BLM's SNPLMA Program coordinates with local governments and the State of Nevada to reserve certain parcels of land within the disposal boundary using the Recreation and Public Purposes Act (R&PP). The R&PP allows government entities and nonprofit organizations to obtain certain public lands for recreation or public purposes through lease or conveyance at less than fair market value. These R&PP leases and conveyances typically include schools, fire and police stations, parks, landfills, municipal facilities, affordable housing, hospitals, and fairgrounds. Since 2007, the BLM has also conveyed 25 acres that resulted in the development of more than 650 affordable housing rental units.

Distribution of SNPLMA Revenue

Ten percent of the revenue generated through SNPLMA land sales is distributed to the Southern Nevada Water Authority, and five percent is provided to the State of Nevada general education fund. Under SNPLMA, the remaining 85 percent of any land disposal revenue is available for the creation of local parks, trails, and natural areas; the acquisition of environmentally sensitive lands; capital improvements on Federal lands; and conservation, restoration, and fuels treatment projects in Nevada and throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin.

The BLM's SNPLMA Program relies on the strength of its collaborative partnerships with State, local, and other Federal agencies in order to implement the Act, including nominating, evaluating, and implementing projects. Rounds of funding awarded under SNPLMA have varied widely over the life of the program, from just under a billion dollars in a single year to less than ten million in another. The real estate market in the Las Vegas Valley, as elsewhere in the nation, peaked in the mid-2000's and declined sharply thereafter. Land sales have increased since the downturn, but have not approached the peak of the mid-2000s. As a result of the variability in the land sale market, the revenue generated for the program has also changed dramatically over the years.

SNPLMA Project Success Stories

Projects funded by SNPLMA have significantly improved the quality of life for those who live in and visit the State of Nevada, Lake Tahoe, and Lake Mead. This impressive legacy includes a healthier environment and enhanced recreational opportunities for current and future generations while allowing for the continued growth of Las Vegas. The following are a few examples of

projects completed through the BLM's SNPLMA Program:

- ***Spring Mountains National Recreation Area Hazardous Fuels Removal Projects***
Approximately 2,170 acres of hazardous fuels treatments in the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area, funded through the SNPLMA program, played a critical role in the ability of firefighters to effectively respond to a wildfire. Two communities were at risk during the Carpenter 1 Wildfire in July 2013, Mount Charleston and Trout Canyon. In the Trout Canyon Community, the areas that had been treated with SNPLMA funding allowed firefighters to provide structure protection and served as a safety anchor point for various firefighting actions. In Mount Charleston, the area treated had removed vegetation and created a wildfire break that slowed the fire near the community and enabled firefighters to safely set backfires that stopped the fire's spread and prevented the loss of homes.
- ***Clark County Environmentally Sensitive Land Acquisitions***
The Gardner and Cliff properties, located within the Red Rock National Conservation Area (NCA) in Clark County, were acquired with SNPLMA funds. The acquisition of these private inholdings from willing sellers within the national conservation area resulted in the removal of incompatible uses, improved management of sensitive resources, and enhanced recreational access.
- ***Craig Ranch Regional Park***
Approximately 150 acres of commercial land in North Las Vegas was acquired and developed into the Craig Ranch Regional Park with SNPLMA funds. The Craig Ranch Regional Park provides a special place where North Las Vegas and Las Vegas residents connect with the outdoor environment by gardening, picnicking, walking, bicycling, playing tennis, playing baseball, playing on wildlife themed equipment and much more. Regular weekly attendance at the park ranges from 2,000 to 6,000 visitors, with the greatest visitation from April to June and September to October.

Conclusion

The BLM has a proven track record of robust partnerships with State and local governments, area Tribes, the public, and other stakeholders to further the land management goals in Nevada. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on these important issues. I would be happy to answer any questions.