

Committee on Resources

resources.committee@mail.house.gov

[Home](#) [Press Gallery](#) [Subcommittees](#) [Issues](#) [Legislation](#) [Hearing Archives](#)

RONDA HORNBECK, LINCOLN COUNTY COMMISSIONER JULY 20, 2004

TESTIMONY ON THE LINCOLN COUNTY CONSERVATION, RECREATION AND DEVELOPMENT ACT OF 2004

Mr. Chairman, Honorable members of the Committee on Resources House of Representatives and honored guests. I would like to thank the Committee for your cordial invitation to participate in this process. It is truly an honor to be a part of working on legislation that will help my county thrive economically and also offer an opportunity to finalize the direction on wilderness given to us by Congress in 1964.

Lincoln County would also like to thank Senators Reid and Ensign, Congressman Gibbons, Porter and Berkley for introducing this important conservation bill. We sincerely appreciate all the time and effort it has taken to put this compromise together so that it will benefit everyone involved. We have waited a long time for an opportunity to grow and we truly appreciate all of this committee's dedication to seeing it through.

My name is Ronda Hornbeck. I am a County Commissioner in Lincoln County, Nevada. I am a native Nevadan. My ancestors settled in the same valley I live in back in 1865. My family has ranched and farmed this valley for 4 generations. There are many families within this county that can boast the same history. We are proud of who we are, where we live and the hard work that has gone on before us to preserve the heritage of this county.

I would like to give you some history on Lincoln County. On February 25, 1866 we became the 11th county in the state of Nevada. Lincoln County is comprised of 10,635 square miles. The population of the entire county is a little over 4,000 people. We have one incorporated city with a population of around 1000 and three unincorporated towns. The remainder of the population live in ranches and small communities throughout the county. The shortest distance between two of our towns is 10 miles. The greatest distance between towns is from the county seat (Pioche) to Alamo which is a 70 mile distance. These are wide open spaces. From where I live, the closest large towns are East into Utah (approximately 100 miles) and South to Las Vegas (approximately 200 miles).

If you were to put Rhode Island, Connecticut and New Hampshire together, they are still smaller than the size of our county. Please take into consideration the fact that only 2% of this entire county is privately owned, and 98% is federally managed. This county operates on the revenues from the 2% private property. The county does receive some Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) funding. However, PILT has never been fully funded. Nevada distributes according to population not on acres managed, so we get very little funding.

We have within our boundaries, 5 state parks, and a wildlife range with approximately 62,000 acres. We also host Nellis Air Force Range with approximately 186,000 acres. These are restricted and protected areas already in place. We have several established areas of critical environmental concern (with 20 more being proposed through the Bureau of Land Management). The county has a good working relationship with the BLM, and are working with them as a cooperating agency with their new 20 year plan. Lincoln County has been good stewards of our lands for the past 138 years.

I would like to take this opportunity to address the different issues within the proposed bill.

In respect to land disposals:

The size of Lincoln County is 10,632 square miles. The existing private property comprises only 238 square miles of that. The bill identifies for disposal 13,373 acres (approximately 21 square miles) and 87,005 acres

(approximately 136 square miles). The 136 square miles in itself represents less than 1% of the entire acreage of the county. In the bill, it also states that 10,000 of those acres may be excluded for protection of habitat and cultural resources. The 13,373 acres from our previous land bill would be the first economic benefit to our county. This would add a much needed tax base. The county identified acreage around our existing city and townships for disposal. Those are areas that would also provide us with opportunity for economic development. Development would help the economy and provide better for the existing families that live here. It would give their children an opportunity to stay within the community instead of either going out of county or out of state to find employment. Because our tax base is so low, we struggle with maintaining a viable employment base, and because we have very little private lands to offer for development, our growth potential is very low.

I can not stress enough how important your assistance is in helping this county grow economically. We are not just lines on a map. The people in this county work hard for the ground they have. We work hard for our way of life and we enjoy the life styles of our communities. We are ranchers, miners, office workers, homemakers, town employees and government employees. Our children grow up knowing how to work hard and appreciate the great outdoors. Through the land disposals, we would benefit not only through taxes, but with a percentage of the proceeds we could develop and improve schools, provide much needed economic development. It would also help us with development of open spaces, parks and trails. We ask that you consider the people that call this county home when you vote on this bill.

In respect to wilderness:

We encourage you to seek resolution to the Wilderness Study Areas. Over the past several years, we as a county have been working on this issue with BLM, environmental groups, US Fish and Wildlife, ranchers, miners and interested citizens of Lincoln County. We have worked to resolve boundary issues, road issues and suitable and non suitable designations. We worked hard to address the concerns of the group and to come to some consensus on each of the WSA's we were addressing. We realize that there needs to be compromise in all things and I feel that we all did our share.

We understand the need for preservation of the areas around us. We do in fact have a very beautiful area. It is a desert environment and the impacts can be very harmful. However, in the full equation of everything considered, there are people who live and make a living on this very same land. This is not a museum where you can only see and not touch. We are a natural resource dependent county.

Some of the biggest concerns were that if there are to be wilderness designations here that our existing roads be cherry stemmed in. In this county's 138 years of existence, there are roads in and through most all of the WSA's. Some of the designations are truly wilderness with no access. However, there are a lot of the roads that were built back when the early settlers moved in. They needed to get lumber for their settlements, and they needed to get from one mining facility to the next. A lot of these same roads have had continued use by ranchers. There are range rights through out all of Lincoln County. The ranchers have historically used all of these roads to get into where they run their cows. They have water sources they need to drive into to keep water flowing for their livestock. They need access in to their allotments to check on the livestock and to take salt and minerals to them. They have built water troughs not only for their livestock but for the betterment of all wildlife in the area. There are hunters who have traveled these roads for years going into areas to hunt. There are miners who have interests in the various WSA's and need access in. There is mining potential that would go away forever if everything is designated as a wilderness. These are interests that have been a part of our history from the start. There are economic benefits attached to each of those concerns. There are people who just enjoy being out in nature, and have taken the opportunity to drive into an area that they have had access to for more years than they can count.

We thank you for allowing in the language the wildlife water projects and existing wildlife activities to continue with the wilderness areas. There are some areas where there are very limited water recourses and the wildlife struggle to find adequate water. The wildlife groups have worked very hard to try to preserve a way of life for the animals in those areas. They have been able to use the existing roads to drive into those areas and build and maintain water guzzlers. They will still need access into those areas. The animals get dependent on those water resources. If you take away a road for wilderness and that takes away the ability to keep the water source in tact, this harms the wildlife that exist there.

Please keep in mind that even though we have a small population in Lincoln County, this is our home, and the impacts of putting a large percentage of our mountains into wilderness will be felt.

One of the main reasons this county was started were the mining interests. We have seen many boom and bust growth patterns through out our history because of mining. Our requests are that you take into consideration not only the mining interests of our citizens but the potential mining economy this county could have. When you take away a potential, it is lost forever, and again, our county relies on our natural resources.

We appreciate the language in the bill that addresses valid existing rights, existing water Rights, and for recognizing Nevada water law. It is vitally important that we protect our existing water rights. We need to make sure that any and all water rights are protected.

We appreciate that you took under consideration all of the private in-holdings and existing roads with in the Table WSA and suggested it for release. Also the release of Evergreen A,B, and C. We still hold concerns on some of the areas that were listed as non suitable. We still request that roads that need to be cherry stemmed will be. When you look on the wilderness maps, it makes it look like this is a county without many roads. Please realize that there are many existing roads through this county, and existing roads through most of the WSA's. These do need to be recognized.

In respect to wildlife:

Lincoln County has done an extensive Elk Management Plan. There was a lot of involvement in getting this plan organized and put through the commission. We are in fact working to upgrade the existing plan. In this plan we have a cap on elk numbers so that the amount of elk in the area does not exceed the forage to sustain them. In order to keep the elk numbers down, there has to be a way to harvest them and get them out of the area. You can walk into an area to take one down, but you can't just pack one out on your back. We need access to do that. We are a popular hunting area for elk and deer. Hunting here has been in existence longer than we have been a county. It brings revenue into our county and this is something we rely on. Again the road access is crucial, not only to the hunters, but to the Fish and Wildlife for maintenance purposes and law enforcement.

We also have a Sage Grouse Plan in its final stages. We are working hard to find a way to keep the sage grouse from being listed as an endangered species. Some of their strutting grounds and places where they hatch their young are being overgrown with pinion and juniper trees. Over the years the sage brush habitat is being replaced with a very dense population of pinion and juniper forest. The BLM and the Fish and Game are working with us to come up with some kind of plan to help the sage grouse population. Again, we need access into the areas and the ability to thin out some of the trees. The land needs to be re-seeded to sustain the sage grouse population in our county.

In respect to wildfire management:

We appreciate the references to wildfire management in the language. The potential of fire hazards within our county is huge. With the drought conditions we have, the beetle infestations that have occurred and the tremendous overpopulation of pinion and juniper trees in some of the WSA's, our current fire hazard level is extremely high. Some of the existing WSA's are just to the east of one of our communities. The ability to fight a fire within the boundaries will be a necessity to prevent loss of human life and structural loss to a community.

In respect to utility corridors:

I can only speak for Lincoln County on this item. As the county has the opportunity to enlarge its private properties, we will need to provide infrastructure to the various areas. We will need to provide them with enough water to sustain their growth and provide power to make it happen. We need the ability to put these corridors in our county master plan so we can make sound planning decisions for our communities.

We will need the pipeline corridors for the Lincoln County Water District so that we can deliver water to any new areas within the county and to bring water to any of the existing areas that may need the water for future growth. We agree with the need to comply with NEPA before granting a right-of-way. Our county commissioners have the responsibility of looking to the future of our county and try to figure out what we can do to develop a strong economy. We want to make sure that we have a corridor dedicated so that all utilities and pipe lines stay within that corridor. We want to make sure that we know where all future utility

corridors will for planning purposes. By designating these corridors we will also minimize environmental impacts.

We support the request from White Pine County asking for a study to investigate the ground water quantity, quality and flow characteristic in the deep carbonate and alluvial aquifers. We respectfully ask that you include a request from Lincoln County for the same study to be done within Lincoln County in this bill.

We support the relocation of the right-of-way and utility corridors. This will provide for development of private properties. The existing corridors are impeding development. Which impedes our tax base. The proposed relocation will place all utility corridors in one side of Highway 93 and off any existing private property. There are no structures in the ground on the side we are proposing to relocate.

We support the transfers of jurisdiction that will clean up management of those corridors.

In respect to the SILVER STATE OFF-HIGHWAY VEHICLE TRAIL:

We are in support of this off-highway trail. We are concerned about protection of the wilderness areas, and we have designed a trails system that will provide opportunity for access to out door recreation on a designated trail system. We have supported tourism within our county for a lot of years. We have a lot of visitors enjoying our out doors and the recreation opportunities we can provide. We want to have the ability to provide the visitors a place they can come into and ride their bicycles, hike, horseback ride and use their outdoor recreational vehicles. By providing them a place to go, it will take the pressure off of some of the areas they now utilize. It is our plan to utilize only existing roads so that we keep the impacts to a minimum. We would like to provide some camping areas close to the trails, and provide a way for the OHV users to come into the different areas of the county for their gas and groceries. We feel that by providing a place to go for those what want to enjoy the out of doors and have the off-highway experience would be in the best interests of this county and the land around us.

In respect to the open space parks:

We support having open space parks conveyed to Lincoln County. Some of the parks requested have traditionally been used for outdoor recreation. By including them in this bill we can work towards upgrading existing camping areas and creating other primitive ones. Some will be a benefit to the Silver State Trail in that we can provide a place to camp for the night.

We support having the State come to the County Commissioners with their requests of expansion.

This bill is designed to promote wilderness, provide recreational opportunity and provide economic development opportunities. We believe that this county can benefit from all of the above. We ask you to remember that even though our numbers are small, the people of this county are still important. We make our living here and when everyone else goes home after all is said and done, we will still live here. We will be the ones that live with the impacts of the decisions that are made. We believe that the economic benefits will be good for all of the residents of the county. We ask that you move forward with passage of this bill. We realize that this is the beginning of the process and we are willing to help where ever we can. The people of Lincoln County would greatly appreciate your support of this bill.