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**Testimony Before the
Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
United States House of Representatives**

**Hearing on H.R. 2016, the National Landscape Conservation System Act
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Thank you for the occasion to testify before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands on H.R. 2016, the National Landscape Conservation System Act. I am Randy Gray, resident and former mayor of Great Falls, Montana. I was also a city commissioner, trustee to the CM Russell Museum, and helped form and for many years served on the board of the Great Falls Development Authority, a regional economic development entity that has generated economic opportunity throughout the Great Falls trade region.

Great Falls is a wonderful town that is fortunate to have a number of special places protected by the National Landscape Conservation System close by. We are proud to be a gateway community for the BLM's Conservation System and appreciate the opportunity to comment on the significance of the National Landscape Conservation System Act.

The National Landscape Conservation System is comprised of lands and waters under the BLM's management that have been congressionally and presidentially designated, including National Monuments, National Scenic and Historic Trails, wilderness areas and other important places. These landscapes have many essential values including opportunities for scientific research, education, recreation, and local economic benefits. These are places where people in Great Falls and other western communities can enjoy occasions as simple as family picnics and historical exploration and as exciting as multi-day float trips and backpacking adventures. Residents of our town and, importantly, visitors from around Montana, the country and the world go to enjoy themselves, discover themselves, and get lost in protected areas that allow for visitors to experience and study the American West as it was viewed by America's first residents and explorers.

I would like to take this opportunity to offer my personal perspective on what makes the BLM's Conservation System an invaluable benefit to my city and other gateway communities. We are lucky enough to have three Conservation System units in our vicinity: the Wild and Scenic Missouri River, the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, and the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. The river and trail pass through our community and the Monument is located within a short drive. These outstanding resources allow not only for recreation, but for exploration of our nation's history. The nation recently celebrated the bicentennial of Lewis and Clark's famed expedition through the area, and Great Falls was proud host of one of the ten national Lewis and Clark signature events, which brought a number of visitors through town.

Today, visitors to the Missouri River can experience the same rugged river and stunning vistas noted by Lewis and Clark on their epic journey. It truly is both wild and scenic. I am both a hunter and canoeist and enjoy these natural and historical treasures myself, along with so many in our community.

These special places have made Great Falls an attractive community for people to establish homes and businesses and to enjoy their benefits and experience the big sky country as it was meant to be. The proximity of Conservation System lands and waters makes our town an attractive location for businesses and residents looking to enjoy our quality of life. These protected areas have been important to diversifying the economy of north central Montana and have helped make our state an attractive place to live. In my time as mayor, it became apparent to me that communities such as mine closest to these natural and historical treasures have enjoyed economic prosperity. And as mayor, many residents discussed with me the benefits of these places to the local economy. While we continue to benefit from important traditional resource-dependent industries, our economy has been diversified by tourism focused around Conservation System lands and waters. Very importantly, well-paying service sector jobs are brought by businesses attracted to the labor pool that chooses to settle near these amenities. These jobs ensure that our community can enjoy sustainable economic prosperity and that our children will benefit from a diverse local economy where employers and employees are equally attracted to our natural and historical resources.

In an extensive academic study complete in 2004, the Sonoran Institute determined that personal income, adjusted for inflation, grows faster in counties with a higher percentage of public land ownership, such as BLM or Forest Service lands, as compared to counties with a much smaller percentage of their land base in public ownership. Furthermore, western counties with public lands protected from development show a greater increase in personal income. The study determined that “counties where more than 60 percent of the federal public lands are in protected status (...National Parks...National Monuments, etc.) have grown 66 percent faster from 1970 to 2000 than counties where the same percentage of public land had no permanent protective status.”

The National Landscape Conservation System Act is straightforward legislation that will simply ensure that these lands and waters will have the permanent recognition they deserve. Congress has the opportunity to ensure that future generations of Montanans and other Americans can enjoy the unique experiences of the Conservation System, and the economic opportunities they offer. As the legacy of President Teddy Roosevelt has demonstrated, permanent recognition of protected public lands has proven time and time again to be of great public benefit, and a forward-looking decision that future generations will thank us for.

I want to thank the committee again for considering this important legislation and hope that Congress can shepherd the bill towards passage. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before the committee on this important bill.