TESTIMONY FROM

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BEFORE THE

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH

OVERSIGHT HEARING ON FOREST AND RANGELAND HEALTH IN NEVADA'S GREAT BASIN

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you Mr. Chairman, my name is John Hiatt and I am Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition (ENLC, the Coalition) with headquarters in Ely, Nevada. The coalition is a partnership whose mission is to restore ecological health to the Great Basin. We appreciate your invitation to participate in today's field hearing to discuss forest and rangeland health in Nevada's Great Basin. The Coalition supports the concept of the President's Healthy Forest Initiative and H.R.I 1904, the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 and sees them as one conduit to bring awareness and assistance to the precarious situation faced by the ecological systems in the Great Basin.

It is our intent today to provide you with information on

· the Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition, and our perspective on the natural resource challenges in the Great Basin (particularly in Nevada),

· The natural systems within the Great Basin

· The significance of our collaborative approach

· The science base for our activities

· Specific needs for eastern Nevada and

· A brief summary statement.

THE EASTERN NEVADA LANDSCAPE COALITION

The Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition is a community-based partnership of 60-plus diverse non-federal members whose goal is to support the restoration of the Great Basin landscapes, initially in eastern Nevada. ENLC partners include agricultural, conservation, cultural and environmental interests, plus members from private enterprise and the broader general public. It is a unique collaboration which has come together to address the very critical problems in the Great Basin. We have set aside philosophical differences to work together in this precedent-setting endeavor. In short, it is diverse collaboration ranging in perspective from the Toiyabe Chapter of the Sierra Club to the Nevada Cattlemen's Association.

Allow me to share a little bit about needs in the Great Basin.

The Great Basin Desert epitomizes the American West. It's 135,000 square miles of expansive, rugged, harsh, arid land . . . and yet at the same time, beautiful, inspiring and reassuring. It is a unique heritage site, unlike any other in the world. It covers a large portion of Nevada and extends into Utah, Idaho, Oregon and California. In its confines, rivers surface and disappear, monsoonal rains both replenish and devastate areas living under the annual specter of drought, wild horses run free, and north-south running mountain ranges, sometimes referred to as sky islands, are separated by seas of sagebrush and grasses. It is home to mule deer, desert bighorn sheep, antelope, elk and other less well known species of wildlife. The Great Basin is home to Native Americans, descendents of pioneers and recent emigrants, all who choose this panoramic region as a place to live. Simply put, it is a unique national treasure whose diversity is threatened.

The Great Basin, as we have known it, is changing; in fact, it is slipping away. Catastrophic fires, invasive-exotic weeds and grasses and domination by woody plants, are the lead problems facing the region, and are stealing from future generations. Historically, fire was a relatively frequent agent of renewal and rejuvenation, both on the valley floors and in the mountains releasing sagebrush, native grasses and wildflowers from competition. This renewal provided a healthy mosaic of vegetation and habitat for wildlife and livestock. These resilient conditions have been replaced by less frequent, larger and more intense fires that encourage the invasion of exotic plants, lower water quality, increase erosion and dramatically reduce wildlife habitat. Because of this reduction in the natural resource base, recreational opportunities are declining and local economies are negatively affected.

The people of the Great Basin are facing the following problems:

INCREASING DOMINANCE OF WOODY PLANTS SUCH AS PINION AND JUNIPER TREES. Pinion and Juniper (P/J) are an integral component of the sagebrush/grass/pinion/juniper complex while at the same time there are distinct P/J woodland communities. However, because of past management and fire suppression, woody species (including sagebrush) have begun to dominate sites of healthy sagebrush and perennial grasses. This results in increasingly closed canopy shading out native perennial grasses. This has the effect of reducing the traditional disturbance regime, which was renewing the various landscapes. That primary disturbance is fire.

FIRE IS A NATURAL EVENT.

Fire has historically played a critical, beneficial role as the major disturbance factor in maintaining healthy landscapes in the Great Basin.

But increasingly, fire has become a catastrophic threat rather than a tool for maintaining health. Climate variation, changes in the disturbance regime from improper grazing, fire suppression, not aggressively controlling invasives as well as the failure to adapt our management have all contributed to our current degraded condition.

This has resulted in the domination of woody species in the herbaceous/sagebrush/pinyon-juniper complex as well as elevated fuel accumulations in woodlands. As a result, the naturally recurring, relatively benign, wildland fires of yesteryear, which rejuvenated the land and released native grasses and wildflowers, giving them competitive advantage over shrubs have largely disappeared. The reduction in fine fuels (grass) and increase in woody fuels has increased the danger of large, dangerous fires that threaten both people and the Great Basin itself. These fires burn with such heat that the seed sources below them are destroyed. The resulting decrease in ecological resiliency to fire favors: accelerating erosion, invasion of exotic vegetation, reduced diversity, limits habitat for certain high profile species and, the almost unrecoverable alteration of vegetative communities.

INVASIVE EXOTIC PLANTS REPLACING NATIVE PLANTS.

Exotic invasives tend to be more adapted to frequent fires and seize every opportunity to replace perennial grasses. The rapid expansion of noxious weeds and non-native annual grasses (which are more fire adaptable), i.e., cheatgrass, have replaced the widespread native perennial bunchgrasses, wildflowers and shrubs. Entire mountainsides and/or valleys have lost their ecological diversity as well as potential for wildlife habitat. Water quality has been degraded and water quantity decreased. Forage for wild horses and livestock has become reduced and undependable. Because of this reduction in the natural resource base, recreational opportunities are declining, traditional cultural values are at risk and local economies are threatened. As a result of denuded landscapes, critical topsoil resources are lost.

I need to stress that all of these problems strongly affect the people now living in the Great Basin. But, just as importantly, these problems are also stealing the heritage of this and future generations which is this unique national ecological treasure. The problems of the Great Basin can and will be solved by a basic two pronged approach, (1) the collaboration of citizen groups with land managers and (2) the application of good science. These problems are being addressed through improved management supported by collaboration and better science.

OURS IS A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH to a Basin-wide problem. A collaborative approach is the key to the solutions to these threats. People solve conservation problems by getting involved. In eastern Nevada we are marshalling the combined forces of the management agencies, conservation organizations, wildlife groups, and academic scientists as well as community leaders and permittees to solve these problems.

These problems will not be solved without management and that management must be based on science. The BLM Eastern Nevada Landscape Restoration Project (ENLRP) is supported by the first four points found below. The four points that follow are recognized by the Coalition as critical to achieving the goal of restoring ecological health to the Great Basin.

1. MANAGEMENT MUST TAKE A LARGE SCALE APPROACH. The management must be implemented with the understanding that components of the landscape are all linked and that evaluating health, not production, will result in being able to implement management for long term benefits for this, and future generations.

2. RESEARCH MUST BE USABLE. Research needed to support management must be applied research. For instance, we need to better understand the role of fire, climate and other disturbances in the dynamics of Great Basin vegetation regimes to enable the systems to manage themselves. We have to concurrently implement management and research in an adaptive process. Currently, there is ongoing applied research looking at the topics of birds and small mammals, hydrology and cheatgrass control but more is needed.

3. ANALYSIS MUST TELL US ABOUT CONDITION AND HEALTH RATHER THAN WHAT WE CAN USE. In an innovative move under the ENLRP, the Ely BLM is using vegetation state and transition models in understanding the changes that have and are taking place. BLM is also implementing adaptive management in compliance with legislation and regulations to improve the management of resources.

4. WE MUST RESIST INVASIVE WEEDS. We need to increase our knowledge of techniques and develop tools for dealing with invasive non-natives and support the Tri County Weed District. We also must increase funding to curb the increase in invasives.

5. A RESEARCH FACILITY. The problems faced in the Great Basin have commonality with those faced in arid environments throughout the world. Problems people commonly face include desertification, inadequate knowledge of landscape scale restoration practices, maintaining water quality and quantity and developing a perspective of long term management goals. Moreover, people often are confronted with major problems in attempting to attain a level of sustainable land use because of inadequate knowledge. Acquiring adequate knowledge for managing the Great Basin is needed and it can come from two sources, adaptive management (with appropriate monitoring) and applied research. There is a crying need for a research facility located in Eastern Nevada to facilitate research, bring research into coordination with management and act as a central point for Research and restoration information in the Great Basin. We envision a facility that not only provides much needed testing and innovations for restoring the Great Basin, but also acts as a conduit to share knowledge with other locations as well as visiting scientists from throughout the globe.

6. THE GREAT BASIN IS SLIPPING AWAY, NOW. We cannot afford to allow things to go on “as usual.” Please see Perryman et al’s paper on the Ecological Cost of Doing Nothing.

7. Pertaining to the healthy forest initiative; unlike in the forested northwest, in the Great Basin there is no sustainable COMMERCIAL forest PRODUCT in sufficient quantity and of great enough value to sustain funding for restoration or management IN THE GREAT BASIN. It is one potential method for supporting restoration, and while it may be sustainable, the Great Basin will not produce wood products in sufficient quantity or quality to support more than a moderate percentage of the funds needed.

8. FUNDING FOR THESE EFFORTS IS NEEDED so we may slow and then reverse the decline of the great basin condition.

In CLOSING: The ENLC is an imaginative part of the approach to solving the problems of the Great Basin. The Great Basin's problems are landscape in scale, and the health of these landscapes is slipping away. The ENLC is a partnership of those who care for and work the land, working side by side with those who manage the land for the people of our country. And the tools being used are both management and the best science (both from existing information and applied research) with the input from many sources to support that management.

We are grateful to this subcommittee for recognizing the serious problems facing both this region and the nation and thank the Chairman and members of this subcommittee for the opportunity to share the views of the Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition.