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Issues Affecting Rural Communities in the Southwest

National Forest Management and
The Endangered Species Act

My name is Jan Holder. I am an environmentalist. My family actively supported the reintroduction of the Mexican Gray Wolf. I am president of a predator-friendly company that sells product in eleven western states. I am on an advisory board for Defenders of Wildlife. And, I am a cattle rancher. I raise cattle on public lands. I promote and support the economic development of farming and ranching. So, what does that make me? A rancher or an environmentalist? I guess that means that just about everyone here will hate me for one of those two reasons.

By saying this, you may think that I have an overdeveloped sense of irony. Or, a death wish. But it's neither. I believe that that most of us here want the same things. Clean water, clean air, healthy ecosystems and abundant wildlife. Being able to have all these things is not a dream. I've seen it happen. There are communities coming together to make things work. And, here's how you can help us.

The Endangered Species Act is important to protect wildlife that we have in the past inadvertently and sometimes purposefully destroyed. But, the Endangered Species Act is another under funded mandate by congress. There were not enough appropriations by congress to allow U.S. Fish and Wildlife to do their job in a timely fashion. There has been no support for farmers and ranchers to allow them to make the changes necessary to "make room" for threatened, endangered or reintroduced species. There has been no money or incentives for them to be good stewards of the land.

As an example, the Mexican Gray Wolf reintroduction has cost taxpayers over seven million dollars to implement. We have spent millions reintroducing the wolf to our modern environment, but we haven't spent one cent reintroducing the ranching community to the wolf.

Many of the small ranches are good stewards of the land. They are growing healthy, safe food and supporting the local wildlife, including many threatened, endangered and reintroduced species. Our ranch is one of them but we are not the only ones. In Montana, the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group is working collaboratively with the environmental community to reduce the conflict between wolves and livestock. In Blaine County Idaho, the Lava Lake Land and Livestock Company is raising sheep in wolf country and has a growing organic lamb company.

The very presence of wolves means extra work for the people in their vicinity. Many ranchers have returned to day herding in order to protect their herds. They move the cattle more often. Change their calving seasons and locations. It has increased the ranchers work load and added expense to their already stretched pocketbooks. And the situation is similar whether we are talking about something as small as the loach minnow, or as large as the grizzly bear.

This situation imperils the very wildlife and wildlife habitat we seek to protect. Combined with the declining economics of commodity-based agriculture and the continuing drought, many ranchers and farmers will not survive. The result will be a changed landscape, with the riparian ecosystems taxed with additional water demands. Between 1992 and 1997, 16 million acres of agricultural land in the U.S. were converted to development. During the last 5 years, the conversion rate more than doubled from the previous decade. The U.S. population is expected to grow by one-half in the next 50 years, and even more pressure will be placed on our farms and ranches to sell their property for development.

With traditional uses of the land altered, development and infrastructure will be added as agricultural land become vacation properties and "ranchettes." These changes are advancing rapidly and the effect will be devastating, with wildlife habitat and large scale land connectivity forever lost. Habitat for threatened and endangered species will be irreparably harmed and increasingly difficult to protect and manage. Wildlife corridors will be forever altered.

We need to consider the economic and social issues along with the environmental concerns in every management decision we make. It's a three legged stool. It will fail unless all three elements are considered equally. When an Environmental Impact Statement is crafted, the social and economic issues are raised. But in implementation, the biological considerations take center stage, while the local community is left without the means to cope effectively. They are not equipped to act proactively. They can only react to the situation as best they can with limited experience and even more limited resources.

As a cattle rancher and an environmentalist what I would to see is: supports and incentives built into the endangered species act to encourage farmers and ranchers to be good stewards of the land. We want to help them learn to coexist with wildlife. These ranchers are producing healthy safe food while protecting our wide open spaces. It benefits all of us to keep them on the land.