

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands

Witness Statement

**STATEMENT OF CARSON (PETE) CULP
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF MINERALS, REALTY AND
RESOURCE PROTECTION
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
H.R. 2950, OREGON LAND EXCHANGE ACT OF 1999
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON
NATIONAL PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS
OCTOBER 21, 1999**

Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to testify on H.R. 2950, the Oregon Land Exchange Act of 1999. While the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) supports the general intent of this bill, to provide for efficient land management through the land exchange program by enhancing public access, aesthetics, and recreation opportunities, we do not support this legislative conveyance and believe the objectives can be accomplished within existing administrative authorities.

Specifically, Title I of this bill discusses the exchange known as the Northeast Oregon Assembled Land Exchange (NOALE). The BLM testified before the Senate Energy subcommittee on Forests and Public Lands Management on October 14, 1999, on the companion bill S.1629, introduced by Oregon Senator Gordon Smith. During that hearing, I stated the Administration's position as one of non-support for the legislation. My testimony today will discuss the historical background and the fundamental aspects of this proposed land exchange.

Historically, land that is currently administered by the BLM is the remaining public domain that was never claimed by homesteaders under the various land disposal acts sponsored by the federal government. Ultimately, these lands became a reflection of the land that early settlers and other land management agencies did not desire, and in turn resulted in a series of BLM managed tracts scattered across the landscape in isolated parcels. Land management adjustments, exchanges, rights-of-way, conveyances, and land disposal projects are nothing new to land management in the western United States. Over the years, land exchanges have been an important tool in improving land management efficiency on an ecosystem-wide scale.

The land exchange before us today was first identified in 1984 as part of BLM's John Day Resource Management Plan (RMP). In 1993, the opportunity for consolidated land ownership was also identified by several private land owners. Specifically, one of the larger property owners in the area initiated land exchange discussions with a third party facilitation organization known as the Clearwater Land Exchange. The initial proposal involved an exchange where BLM would dispose of difficult to manage, isolated lands, in exchange for valuable stream side areas. Nearly 80 percent of the lands considered under this exchange are 80 acres or less. In addition, most of the lands are surrounded by private lands and do not have vehicular access.

As these proposals evolved, the Clearwater Land Exchange team began to contact other area landowners to discuss the array of possible land exchanges with BLM. Following a public tour in October of 1996, the BLM went forward with the notice of intent to develop an environmental impact statement (EIS) for the exchange in December 1996. After extensive public outreach to landowners, local communities, and tribal governments, the BLM began work on the draft environmental impact statement, and in June of 1998, the final EIS was published. However, the public review process has not been completed regarding individual proposed land exchange transactions.

In all, this proposed exchange involves over 160,000 acres in several Oregon counties. The BLM would potentially transfer 90,000 acres of isolated public lands, and acquire 70,000 acres of private land with significant natural resource values, thus creating an improved land ownership and management pattern in Northeast Oregon.

The sheer scope of the land exchange being discussed has resulted in a process containing a series of smaller and more manageable phases. Once the Record of Decision and public review process is completed, and if a no action alternative is not chosen, the first phase would primarily involve lands in Grant, Wheeler, Umatilla, and Morrow Counties. Following the completion of the disposal of lands in the first phase, the BLM would continue the public review process for future proposed exchange transactions, and with the help of the Clearwater Land Exchange, work to exchange the remaining lands.

Mr. Chairman, we do not support this legislation because we believe the exchange objectives can and should be accomplished within existing administrative authorities. It is also important to complete the public review process as part of our land exchange procedures and not short change these processes legislatively. We support the tenets of the Northeast Oregon land exchange proposal however, without the use of legislation.

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate this opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee to discuss this bill. I will be glad to answer any questions.

#