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House Resources Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources

Hearing on the Impacts of Environmental Regulations on Energy and Mineral Development: The Wildlands Project
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Chairman Gibbons and distinguished members of Congress:

Thank you for the invitation to testify before this Subcommittee today. My name is Teresa Conner. I am here today in my capacity as the Manager of Environmental Resources for Queenstake Resources USA, Inc.. I am also representing the Women's Mining Coalition, as their immediate past president and current advisor.

I have a bachelor's degree in Mining and Geological Engineering from the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology. I have over 24 years of experience in the mining and petroleum industries primarily in Alaska, Nevada and New Mexico. I have worked for the federal government, small, mid-tier and large mining companies, a consulting firm and briefly had my own consulting business. My work has predominately centered around permitting, both for exploration and development, and mine engineering. I am a member of several professional societies and organizations, including Society for Mining, Metallurgy, and Exploration, Inc., the Nevada Mining Association, the New Mexico Mining Association, the International Society of Explosives Engineers, the Women's Mining Coalition, and the American Association of Professional Landmen.

I became aware of The Wildlands Project roughly 13 years ago. Because of the incredible scope of the project and its' potential impact on future access to natural resources and their ultimate development, I have followed their progress since that time.

Overview:

Mined materials and the products created therefrom are necessary for every day life. From the toothpaste we use each day to the homes we live in and the transportation we use, as well as the tools we utilize for both work and play --- we could not function as a society without the basic materials that the mining industry supplies. This being said, this most basic of industries is being continually threatened on various fronts, not the least of which is the current and possible future limits to access to areas of potentially economic mineral deposits. The Wildlands Project (TWP) epitomizes this threat to the mining industry.

Land Statistics:

Currently, there are approximately 320,000 acres of land either under an approved mining plan of operations, or under a pending plan of operations, as estimated by the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service. Just the BLM alone manages approximately 262 million acres of public land in the west. Even if you assume the entire 320,000 acres to be on BLM land, it amounts to only one tenth of one percent! In reality, mining impacts a negligible amount of public land.

By comparison, there are over 43 million acres of land set aside by the BLM in their National Landscape Conservation System. This system includes National Conservation Areas, National Monuments, Wilderness Areas, Wilderness Study Areas, National Wild and Scenic Rivers and National Historic and Scenic Trails. This amounts to over 16 percent of the total BLM-managed lands.

My point in mentioning these statistics, is that The Wildlands Project proposes that huge segments of the land mass of the United States, roughly 50 per cent by their calculations, be preserved as "wild" areas. These areas would be not only off limits to any type of natural resources exploration and development, but to people as well. As I have indicated, there are already a substantial number of acres of publicly-managed land that is currently set aside in the form of National Conservation Areas, National Monuments, Wilderness Areas, Wilderness Study Areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers and National Historic and Scenic Trails, as well as several other types of protected areas.

Use of the Endangered Species Act and Other Laws as Tools:

In the literature that The Wildlands Project has produced over the years, they describe how to create their "core reserves and primary corridors". This of course requires looking at the distribution of "rare species and community types", with the intent to manage these core reserves areas in such a way that puts "biodiversity first". There are literally hundreds of cases of appeals, listings of threatened and endangered species, litigation, legislation, regulations, and management plans that are a direct result of numerous environmental organizations working in unison and toward the ultimate goal of The Wildlands Project.

The basic tenant of The Wildlands Project is that wildlife cannot co-exist near mining operations, or any other type of human-created activity, and that they require immense land masses in order to survive. I am here today to let this Subcommittee know that this could not be further from the truth. There are countless examples of wildlife not only co-existing, but flourishing at and near active mining operations. Let me provide you with one example from the perspective of a mining company.

Queenstake Resources is a mid-tier gold producer. We operate four underground gold mines in the Jerritt Canyon area of the Independence Mountain Range in northeast Nevada. The majority of our operations occur on U.S. Forest Service-managed lands.

In the Independence Mountain Range, the northern goshawk is one species that has received considerable attention. In 1997 the species was proposed for listing under the ESA (62 F.R. at 50896). Studies of the northern goshawk in the Independence and Bull Run Mountains in the Humboldt National Forest started in 1991 through the joint efforts of then-operator, Independence Mining Company, Inc. and the United States Forest Service (USFS). Since that time there have been numerous studies conducted and data collected that do not support listing the northern goshawk as an endangered species. Had the northern goshawk been listed as a threatened and endangered species there would have been huge impacts not only to our Jerritt Canyon mining operations, but across the west. Large tracts of land would have been locked up needlessly.

Queenstake Resources and our predecessor companies at the Jerritt Canyon Mine have developed, with the USFS, management guidelines that we continue to adhere to today. The Master Base Plan of Operations for exploration activities, approved in 1994, includes several mitigation measures, but the one I will describe today outlines how we will address concerns regarding the northern goshawk. These measures include temporal and spatial restrictions to avoid any effects to the Post Fledgling Area (PFA) of the northern goshawk. These restrictions require that Queenstake not conduct disturbing activities from March 15 to June 1 annually. At that point, a determination of nest activity or inactivity is made. This requires an annual survey of nesting areas in order to determine activity or lack thereof. If there is no activity in a nest, then work can proceed. However, if a nest is active, no work can occur for at least 6 weeks after fledging, or approximately mid-August. These restrictions have become second nature to our exploration geologists and it is understood that any drilling or other related activities cannot occur until they are satisfied.

Conclusion:

In my experience, there are several examples of how mining operations co-exist with wildlife. The northern goshawk is only one of those examples and indicates that it is not only possible, but a commonplace occurrence. These types of success stories do not just happen in Nevada. At mining operations all across the United States successful management for wildlife values are happening everyday. For those of us involved in these operations, we see absolutely no need for the wide-sweeping and totally unwarranted proposal of The Wildlands Project to set aside roughly 50% of this country's landmass for the sole purpose of "rewilding" our nation.

Recommendations:

In light of the impacts of environmental regulations on energy and mineral development and how The Wildlands Project plays into that picture I have a few recommendations for the Subcommittee's consideration. First, in the current effort to reform the Endangered Species Act, it is imperative that sound science be utilized when assessing the need to list a species as threatened or endangered. For all proposed listings actual, verifiable field data that demonstrates the presence of a species should be required. In conjunction with this, there should also be a requirement for independent scientific review. Second, prior to designating critical habitat for a species, the completion or amendment of recovery plans should be required. Third, an economic impact analysis should be required when any restrictions are developed in conjunction with a listing under the ESA. Finally, because of the potential impact of The Wildlands Project, I would strongly urge this Subcommittee to review all available information on this project and to determine its' true merits.