

Mr. James Jeffress  
Resident of Lovelock, Nevada  
Pershing County, Nevada

Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources  
Committee on Resources  
United States House of Representatives

Oversight Hearing on  
“Sustainable Development Opportunities in Mining Communities”  
Part II

July 28, 2005

I appreciate the opportunity to present testimony for the Committee's record on sustainable development opportunities in mining communities. I am now a private resident of Pershing County, and have lived in northern Nevada my whole life. I am a 1972 graduate of the University of Nevada Reno with a BS in Wildlife Management. I have worked as a certified wildlife biologist for over thirty years, including as the Washoe County Wildlife Biologist and the Humboldt County Wildlife Biologist, and have been involved in over fifty collaborative planning processes dealing with public land or wildlife related issues (i.e. Coordinated Resource Management Plans, the Modoc-Washoe Stewardship Planning Process, numerous Technical Review Team processes, allotment processes, statewide Sage-Grouse conservation planning effort, etc.). Before retiring from the Nevada Department of Wildlife in 2003,<sup>1</sup> I received the Department's 2002 Employee of the Year award.

I am currently self-employed as a private consultant, working for a variety of private and public interests including the United States Bureau of Land Management District Office in Winnemucca, where I am assisting the Bureau in drafting the narrative portions of the Sage-Grouse Conservation Plans for Humboldt County. I am a past member of the Board of Directors for Nevada Bighorn Unlimited, and have worked extensively on re-introducing California Bighorn Sheep back into Nevada. I was one of the originating founders of the Nevada Chukar Foundation, which has placed wildlife guzzlers (water developments) throughout Northern Nevada and provided other programs to improve habitat for Nevada's Chukar Partridge and a myriad of other wildlife species. I currently serve on the Pershing County Checkerboard Lands Committee<sup>2</sup> and as a Commissioner of the Nevada Wildlife Commission. I live with my wife Paige, and our two children Kelli and Matt, in Lovelock, NV about 90 miles northeast of Reno, NV.

I have spent most of my career in Northern Nevada, where hard rock mining on federal lands is a crucial part of the economy. Most of the good-paying jobs in Lovelock and Winnemucca, my current and previous cities of residence, are mining jobs or are directly related to the mining industry. The 1980's and early 1990's were a great time for rural Nevada, when strong gold and silver prices brought large mining operations, good jobs, and prosperity to little Nevada towns that had not enjoyed these advantages in a long time. The mid-1990's brought some cutbacks in the industry as prices dropped. In Winnemucca and towns like it, times were tough for many families as companies reduced their employment or shuttered mines. People held on and hoped for a better future, which has now arrived again with higher gold and silver prices.

---

<sup>1</sup> From 1993-2003, the Department was known as the Nevada Division of Wildlife, a division of the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. The Nevada Legislature created the Department of Wildlife in 2003, elevating it to a Cabinet-level agency (Assembly Bill 41).

<sup>2</sup> The Committee was created by the Pershing County Board of County Commissioners to coordinate discussions about federal land use issues in the County and potential federal legislation addressing future land use. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the federal government granted to railroad companies every other section of land along the right-of-way for the transcontinental railroad to create incentives for construction and settlement. The resulting "checkerboard" creates difficult management issues for the BLM and impairs the ability of private landowners to use and develop their lands. One of the major goals of the Pershing County Checkerboard Lands Committee is to address and resolve the problems created by the checkerboard in the County.

For many Nevada communities, employment is up and the future looks bright, but this is not the case for the City of Lovelock and Pershing County. Many wage earners in Lovelock work at the Rochester mine, or have jobs directly related to it, but that mine will close within two or three years, and there are no mining or other projects in development that will be able to replace those jobs. The mine has been a mainstay in the County for twenty years, even during the low metals prices of the 1990's, but its resources are mined out. A lot of people in Lovelock do not remember what things were like before the Rochester mine opened; the economic dislocation caused by its closure will be traumatic.

The closure of the Rochester mine is one of the greatest challenges facing our community, and people are concerned about how to deal with the dramatic loss of jobs, taxes, and other economic benefits. Some people certainly will relocate to other mining jobs in other parts of Nevada or the west (or elsewhere in the world) and will do just fine. How Lovelock will survive as a community and its future economic development is important to me and to others who plan to remain there.

In a larger sense, how Pershing County reacts to the closure of the Rochester mine may help other mining communities learn how to survive the closure of the mines that help sustain their economies. In our earlier history, these kinds of events created the ghost towns of the western United States, but times are different and our policies for dealing with this kind of change have also changed for the better. One of those policies is the concept of "sustainable development," which is what the Committee is looking into in this hearing.

I am not an expert on sustainable development, but I believe I have several ideas of value to contribute to this Subcommittee. I live in a mining community, and have done so for most of my adult life. My career as a wildlife biologist (and currently as a consultant on wildlife management issues) makes me very familiar with federal lands management in rural Nevada. Finally, my involvement in the various civic affairs of Pershing County and rural Nevada generally makes sustainable economic development a topic of utmost importance for me.

The most important fact to know about Northern Nevada is that it is overwhelmingly owned by the federal government. Exactly 91.6 percent of the land in Pershing County is federally owned, and most of it is managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Pershing County is large as counties go – about 6,037 square miles or 3,803,680 acres – with long distances between developed location. Mr. Chairman, that is 1000 square miles larger than the State of Connecticut. There is only one city of any size – Lovelock – which is surrounded by federal land. The county is sparsely populated; there are about 6,400 residents, with approximately half living in Lovelock. My point is that with this much land under the control of the federal government, there is little chance that Pershing County can attract economic development (sustainable or otherwise) without the active cooperation of the federal government.

A second, extremely important fact is that we have very little infrastructure to offer in the pursuit of economic development opportunities. The federal lands that dominate the county have roads only to the extent they were built to service mines, ranching, or other permitted activities on those lands. Most of Pershing County is roadless, has no access to cell signals or other telecommunications and no water or power.

A story from my experience as a consultant illustrates very well how these two facts work together to control what can and cannot be done in rural Nevada. A few years ago, a businessman from Texas contacted me to explore the possibility of installing windmills in Pershing County to generate power. Nevada, including Pershing County, has significant wind generation resources. The man asked me to help identify access roads to particular sites he was interested in for the windfarm. I explained that there were no roads, that road construction would be necessary, and that construction would be controlled by the Bureau of Land Management. Construction of roads would be expensive and time-consuming, and under the best circumstances would take a year or more to approve because of the necessity to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act. Eventually, the lack of infrastructure, the potential scoping process with various other groups, and the federal control of the approval process discouraged this investor.

Mr. Chairman, I do not offer this story as criticism of the BLM; to my knowledge, this man never contacted the BLM or started any process to obtain approvals necessary to build a wind farm. In his mind the hurdles were too formidable. To me, this story simply illustrates that in Pershing County and places like it, we must have the cooperation and support of the federal government in order to build our economies.

The other lesson of this story is that infrastructure, where it exists, is extremely valuable. Where they can be used, these resources constitute “sustainable development” in a very real sense. For Pershing County, the roads, power lines, buildings and other facilities at the Rochester mine have immense value if they can be used for something besides mining. I need to be clear that I am not expert on Coeur’s proposal to haul aggregate and rock from the site. I have some familiarity with it, but it is not my place to say whether or not it would be successful. What I can say is that the federal government and Pershing County should look carefully at any economic development proposal that can take advantage of the roads, power lines, and other facilities Coeur built to support its mining operation. If there is any way to use these valuable assets to create jobs and keep workers in Pershing County, and comply with federal and state regulations regarding environmental concerns, we should support it. Opportunities should be assessed as a viable resource and not discounted merely because of current regulations. The site-specific nature of each situation should be examined as compared to “no remaining opportunities” for sustained economic development.

Mr. Chairman, thanks to the rich mineral resources in the State of Nevada, the mining industry is the biggest source of economic stability in rural Nevada, providing jobs, benefits, infrastructure, and tax revenues to communities that otherwise would not

thrive. Unfortunately, all mining operations are finite in their life spans, and in Pershing County, that truism is about to become a reality. For the citizens of our County, it is particularly important for the federal government to figure out just what “sustainable development” means in the mining industry, and what needs to be done to promote it.