

Committee on Resources

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October 24, 2003

The Honorable Richard W. Pombo

Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Resources

Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Pombo & Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the forest and rangeland health in Nevada's Great Basin. I am a board member of the Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition as a wildlife representative. I am also heavily involved in wildlife conservation organizations across the state. I am a director of Nevada Bighorns Unlimited – Reno and Chairman of the Coalition for Nevada's Wildlife. These wildlife conservation groups are entirely volunteer entities that focus on the enhancement of our wildlife resources through big game reintroductions, water development, habitat improvement, wildfire reseeding, education, research, and land planning. Nevada Bighorns Unlimited, for instance, in partnership with our state Department of Wildlife and federal land management agencies, has reintroduced bighorn sheep back into over 50 mountain ranges in Nevada. (Bighorn sheep faced extinction by man only a century ago.) We believe this is the most ambitious and successful big game reintroduction program in the world – largely funded by private donations and volunteer efforts.

In spite of our successes, we are faced with many challenges which at times seem overwhelming. Most notable of these challenges is our rapid loss of wildlife habitat – not only in Nevada, but across the Great Basin. In Nevada this destruction of wildlife habitat is primarily due to:

Wildfire followed by the invasion of non-native plant species such as cheat grass;

Pinion/juniper intrusion into sagebrush and native grass communities; and,

Wild horse overpopulation.

The alarming result has been the steady decline of sagebrush-obligate species – notably the mule deer and the sage grouse. These species are heavily monitored and are indicative of the adverse impacts on a myriad of other wildlife species depending on healthy rangeland.

We lose over 50,000 acres annually to pinion/juniper invasion in the BLM Ely District alone. Springs dry up, the closed timber canopy chokes out the under-story of shrubs and grasses necessary to support wildlife, and entire watersheds are degraded. The pinion/juniper canopy becomes so dense that when the inevitable lightning strike starts a wildfire, it is uncontrollable and burns so hot that it sterilizes the ground of its native seed bed. Since inadequate funding or manpower exists to adequately restore the huge burns, a permanent loss of wildlife habitat results. The end result is a decline in wildlife, extreme danger to humans and wildlife from fire and subsequent flooding, loss of grazing for domestic livestock – a loss to the public in general.

At the Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition our board has long recognized the need to reverse this alarming trend. We urge a proactive and much more cost effective approach of thinning pinion/juniper in contrast to the present costly and ineffective reaction to fighting fire and reseeding afterward. Our volunteer board (representing ranching, environmentalists, wildlife, small business, and local government) takes time away from their businesses and private lives for a common goal – to create a better Nevada. We are strong supporters of multiple uses on our public lands, and we know that all of our special interests must work

together for this common goal. We fully recognize our efforts will not be realized immediately, but will greatly benefit future generations; however, our biggest mistake would be to do nothing.

Thank you for your consideration.

Larry J. Johnson, Board Member

Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition