



Written statement of

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Commissioner
Carbon County, Wyoming

On behalf of the National Association of Counties

“Promoting Conservation with a Purpose on America’s Federal Lands and Forests”

Before the
U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands

March 8, 2023
Washington, D.C.

Chairman Tiffany and Ranking Member Neguse, thank you for holding this hearing on promoting conservation with a purpose on America's federal lands and forests.

My name is John Espy, and I am a fifth-generation rancher and a member of the Carbon County, Wyoming Board of County Commissioners. I also serve as First-Vice President of the National Association of Counties' Western Interstate Region, Chairman of the Wyoming County Commissioners Association Agriculture, Water, State and Public Lands Committee, county representative to the Wyoming Sage-Grouse Implementation Team, rancher representative to the South-Central Wyoming Local Sage-Grouse Working Group, and Carbon County Co-Chair for the Wyoming Public Lands Initiative. I am here today on behalf of the National Association of Counties.

Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the U.S. Forest Service wrote in 1909, "Conservation means the wise use of the earth and its resources for the lasting good of men." Counties encourage Congress to develop policies that reflect this ethic and to pass legislation focused on conserving our lands and resources, rather than preserving all of them in perpetuity. Purposeful conservation allows for sustainable timber harvests for economic benefit and also to improve forest health, reduce the threat of wildfire across our National Forest System, and to protect our gateway communities.

Public lands are a defining feature of the United States, particularly in the West. Counties serve as conveners and offer local, detailed expertise on resource management issues that is beneficial to all levels of government and helps to achieve mutual goals. Counties believe that environmental and socioeconomic values must be balanced through a philosophy of multiple use management that allows diverse activities on public lands to support local economies. This is best achieved when federal agencies treat counties as governing partners and co-regulators by coordinating their resource management plans to ensure they are consistent with those of impacted counties. Additionally, counties have specific legal jurisdiction and expertise in certain areas. We must be given the opportunity to meaningfully participate as cooperating agencies from the beginning of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, so that we can lend our experience and expertise to better inform federal decisions.

About Carbon County, Wyoming

Carbon County is in south-central Wyoming, bordering Colorado. Carbon County is a rural county with a population of approximately 15,000. The county covers approximately 7,900 square miles and contains a large share of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest, which is home to pristine recreation sites including Sugarloaf Mountain, Medicine Bow Peak and Mirror Lake.

About 54 percent of Carbon County's surface is federally owned, which is slightly higher than the state's average of around 47 percent. My county's economy is directly tied to public lands, with mineral and energy production, agriculture and tourism serving as our top-three industries. Consequently, the socioeconomics of my county is significantly impacted by how federal lands are managed. Carbon

County is not alone, every county in Wyoming, and virtually all counties throughout the West, must work collaboratively with our federal partners to ensure our land and resources are managed properly and support our local economies and our cultural heritage.

We regularly partner with federal agencies, the state government, tribes and private landowners on a range of natural resource issues. For example, the Carbon County Weed and Pest District, funded by county taxes, has treated over 50,000 acres of federal, state and private lands to control invasive weeds and grasses that choke off native vegetation and elevate wildfire risks. Our conservation district also worked closely with federal agencies to remove sediment from the North Platte and Little Snake Rivers in recent years. To incentivize the United States Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to increase their use of Good Neighbor Authority, the State of Wyoming appropriated \$400,000 to hire positions within the state forestry division to conduct cooperative forest management projects on federal lands.

We pride ourselves on providing opportunities for local voices to be heard on the federal land management stage. After years of working with public land stakeholders, including conservation organizations, outdoor recreation groups, extractive industries, agriculturalists, and wildlife associations, Wyoming counties submitted management recommendations on Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) within their borders, that are addressed by the Wyoming Public Lands Initiative Act. Under the Act, certain Wyoming WSAs that have been stuck in limbo - waiting for Congress to act on the BLM's recommendations from 1991 - would be designated as wilderness, assigned a special management area, or released back to multiple-use management. Carbon County's recommendations designated the Encampment River Canyon and Prospect Mountain WSAs as wilderness, established the Black Cat Special Management Area, and released Bennett Mountain multiple-use management. This legislation was developed at the grassroots level with local input and serves as a strong example of how true conservation objectives can be met through collaboration.

As energy demands grow and consumer appetites change, my county has proactively responded to the nation's energy needs. Carbon County is not only a proud petroleum producer, but we are also leading the way on renewable energy development with the Chokeycherry and Sierra Madre Wind Energy Project, which is housed on 1,400 acres of federal, state and private checkerboard land. The project, once completed, will be the largest wind farm in the United States and one of the largest in the world providing enough electricity to power one million homes. We worked with the BLM, state government, private landowners, and the Power Company of Wyoming through each phase of the project to ensure it met the needs of our residents with limited impact on the environment. The project has generated millions of dollars in tax revenues for all levels of government, created good paying local jobs and serves to meet the president's goal of reducing our reliance on fossil fuels.

Beyond land and minerals, we also boast a blue-ribbon fishery – the North Platte River – designated by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, which includes an area known as the Miracle Mile. Visitors from around the world come to Carbon County to fly fish and catch our amazing trout. We work with federal and state officials to ensure this wonderful stretch river remains some of the best trout habitat in the West. Every resident and government official in Carbon County recognizes how conservation of this vital resource benefits our community and everyone who lives downstream.

Counties are best suited to assist federal land managers navigate evolving management challenges. For its part, Carbon County continues to update its land use plans and federal natural resource plans and to adapt to environmental, economic, and community concerns. For example, our latest updates identify sensitive habitats and include consultation requirements with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department when siting new projects to mitigate impacts to migration corridors for big game animals.

Counties are heavily engaged in species management. As part of the Sage-grouse Implementation Team, made up of local, state and federal agencies, industry, and non-government organizations, we work to protect the Greater Sage-grouse in Wyoming. Far from a one-size fits all approach, we give particular attention to locally driven solutions, supported by science, that result in sustainable outcomes for Wyoming's wildlife, economy, and way of life. While Greater Sage-grouse efforts are more visible, commissioners volunteer their time and expertise across the state to participate in local working groups and advisory councils with federal lands agencies. Long after the Record of Decisions are printed, counties remain committed to assisting our federal partners on plan implementation to strengthen our mutual goals. Public lands are not just squares on a map, they are a source of tranquility, the foundation of our cultural identity, and the lifeblood of our economies.

Conclusion

Chairman Tiffany and Ranking Member Neguse, thank you for the invitation to testify today. I urge Congress to work across the aisle and craft viable legislation to empower state, local and tribal partners to work with federal agencies to better manage our public lands and natural resources. The best resource management decisions are made when federal agencies and local government partners look at the same piece of ground at the same time and work collaboratively.

Thank you again for the opportunity to tell you the county story and to share some of our ideas for improving the health of our public lands and watersheds. I look forward to answering your questions.