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County Commissioner
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Testimony on “*State and Local Efforts to Protect Species, Jobs, Property, and Multiple Use Amidst a New War on the West.*”

Chairman Hastings and members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of Phillips County at the House Natural Resources Committee Oversight Field Hearing.

I am Lesley Robinson, Chairman of the Montana Association of Counties Public Lands Committee, a Commissioner from Phillips County and a member of the Montana Stockgrowers Association.

Phillips County spans 5,213 square miles. We have approximately 4,000 people and 56,000 cattle in our county. 98% of Phillips County’s 3.2 million acres is classified as agriculture land. Approximately 33% is managed by the BLM and 49% is private land.

Phillips County’s economy is dependent on Agriculture and Natural Gas production. 2012 Montana Agricultural Statistics state cash sales of agricultural commodities for Phillips County was \$80 million. These raw agricultural commodities are further processed and transported to other regions of the US and world, generating \$434 million in commerce. Based on annual consumption levels Phillips County produces enough beef to feed 343,350 people and enough wheat to feed 1.6 million people.

I am a fourth generation Phillips County rancher. Our ranch sits in the middle of “core area 2” on the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks sage grouse designation and the Bureau of Land Management “Greater Sage-Grouse Protection Priority Area.” This area covers a major portion of Phillips and Valley County, including 1.6 million acres total. With 54% of this acreage, under BLM management and 27% being private, any potential listing of sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act, Any action will have a significant economic impact on rural economies in this area and the state.

Currently the BLM has just released the HiLine Draft Resource Management Plan (RMP). The HiLine District administers 763 permits, permitting approximately 386,600 Animal Unit Months (AUMs) of livestock forage. All 969 allotments in the planning area have been assessed for rangeland health standards. Out of those allotments, nine hundred and seven allotments are meeting rangeland health standards. This is a 93% success rate for grazing allotments in this planning area. While the ranching community is always striving to keep improving, this is proof that our industry has been successful in working with the BLM to meet the objectives.

I would like to share with the Committee some research that was conducted in south Phillips County where I live. The research title is Landscape-Scale Factors Affecting Population Dynamics of Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) in North-Central Montana, it

was conducted from 2001-2004 by Brendan James Moynahan, PhD Candidate with The University of Montana.

Moynahan radio-tagged 243 hens during a 3-year study of sage-grouse in south Phillips County. In his first year of the study, 2001 most nest failures (94%) were attributed to depredation, and most nest depredations (63%) were attributed to avian predators. He suspected that California gulls were the primary predators (Moynahan 2004: 29)

Of the successful nests of the marked hens in 2001 only one chick survived to 30 days (Moynahan 2004: 69)

Moynahan noted that even in “areas of expansive, high-quality habitat such as south Phillips County, winters may be so severe as to have clear and substantial populations-level impacts” (Moynahan 2004: 128). Additionally he suggested that the effects of West Nile virus were pronounced (Moynahan 2004: 129).

The fact that there is a hunting season on sage-grouse administered by the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, indicates a healthy population. Additionally, the state agency is capturing live birds in south Phillips County and transporting them to Canada to improve their population. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks believes the sage-grouse population is stable over the last 30 years. There is no published research data that indicates livestock grazing has any impact on sage-grouse populations.

If a listing of sage grouse under the ESA were to occur, it would have a dramatic effect on our community and state. I believe one of the first actions to be implemented would be a reduction or elimination of grazing in sage grouse areas. The socioeconomic impacts of this type of action would be substantial. The likely reductions in livestock grazing on federal lands could have great impacts on local economies like ours that are dependent on livestock production.

It is my experience that species conservation will happen only at the ground level. No one is better equipped or motivated to prevent ESA listings than ranchers, who own and/or manage the land that is most likely to be prime species habitat. If you give ranchers and their local governments an opportunity, they will develop the voluntary, proactive measures, they can implement that benefit the species in question. This approach meets the needs of the community, while also meeting the needs of wildlife.

A Public Opinion Strategies poll in Montana also supports the ideals of having a strong economy and a healthy environment. 72% of those surveyed, said they supported the statement that “We can protect land and water and have a strong economy with good jobs for Americans at the same time, without having to choose one over the other.” The survey also pointed out that there was strong support for allowing Montana to better manage wildlife to avoid federal government interference. Montanans know what’s best for Montana.

In addition to the agricultural economy of our county, 4 of the top 15 taxpayers in Phillips County are gas companies. Direct employment from gas production in Phillips County has

resulted in 37 full time jobs. TransCanada has also proposed the Keystone XL pipeline. The route would enter Montana in Phillips County and pass through Valley, McCone, Dawson, Prairie and Fallon Counties. We have seen case after case of projects such as this being derailed because of ESA listings and the habitat associated with those species. If these projects fail to materialize, so do the good paying jobs and essential tax revenue to the county. The active management of Public Lands is essential to the economy of our community. Allowing multiple use of federal lands, is a critical step in ensuring a secure food and fuel supply for the American people.

I firmly believe that species conservation is a community-driven effort that strives to work with individuals, groups and agencies to achieve a goal. It is essential that addressing species, such as sage grouse, is a grassroots effort, not a top down approach. It is imperative that we provide your Committee and the entire Congress, the input that is needed to modernize the ESA process to meet the future needs of our communities, state and nation.