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TESTIMONY OF DR. KERRY ROHRMEIER
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BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCES
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Chairman Stauber, Ranking Member Ansari and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Dr. Kerry Rohrmeier, and I work as the Climate and Energy Strategy Director for the Nevada Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. I appreciate the opportunity to address the House Natural Resources Energy and Mineral Subcommittee on a critical component of America's energy future: geothermal energy.

The Nature Conservancy is a global conservation organization. TNC has chapters in all 50 states, and our work extends around the globe into 83 countries and territories. Our mission is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. Grounded by decades of local on-the-ground experience, we look to bring together real-world solutions, policy expertise, sustainable financing and collaborative partnerships that can affect lasting change. We believe that by working together, we can overcome barriers to the solutions our planet needs.

In the coming years, Americans will be using an unprecedented amount of electricity. This trend is driven by things that improve the economy: a revitalization of American manufacturing, innovation driving artificial intelligence and increasing use of electrified technologies. Meeting this heavy load demand will require a mix of energy resources, as no single form of energy can meet this challenge alone. Clean, firm geothermal energy can deliver affordable, reliable energy, support economic growth and provide cleaner air for our communities while also tackling climate change by reducing emissions.

Geothermal is well positioned to play an increasingly important role in domestic energy generation. Geothermal can produce reliable power—meaning 24/7, weather-independent production—that naturally complements other forms of domestic energy generation. Geologic studies have shown that the U.S. has extensive geothermal resources across the country that have the potential to provide gigawatts of additional baseload power. The geothermal industry's adoption of new drilling techniques and new technologies, such as superhot rock, can allow for more flexibility in siting, reduced project footprints and fewer transmission needs.

Heat from the earth is abundant and there is immense potential to secure even more power from emerging geothermal technologies like Enhanced Geothermal Systems (EGS). EGS is poised for exponential growth, thanks to key technological

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breakthroughs in directional or horizontal drilling and fiber optic microseismic monitoring adapted from the oil and gas industry. These new techniques and technologies have the potential to provide not only substantial energy production but also offer the opportunity to site projects where they will have the least conflicts with communities, natural resource use and wildlife conservation.

The U.S. is currently a world leader in the growing geothermal power market, with established research and technical expertise at startup companies, universities and national labs as well as extensive natural resources. However, to maintain its leadership position and fully capitalize on the clean energy potential of its vast geothermal resources, the U.S. government and private sector should nurture this expanding industry. Furthermore, the demand for clean, firm energy is increasing because several states are committed to securing renewable, carbon-free energy resources. To fully unlock the country's geothermal energy potential, the industry needs support to scale up.

Like all energy development, geothermal has the potential to pose adverse impacts on land, air, water, wildlife and cultural resources, but it does not have to with careful planning and siting. Construction and operation of geothermal facilities can lead to land disturbances that negatively impact wildlife, noise from construction and operations, hydrological impacts to groundwater systems and associated sensitive habitats, or damage to culturally important places. Projects should be sited, constructed and operated to avoid and minimize these negative impacts, where possible, and mitigated when necessary. Recognizing that these risks exist, we can advance geothermal energy production and technological expansion through responsible planning, siting, and permitting.

Federal policies can help facilitate broader deployment of geothermal energy while also ensuring we protect the environment and our communities, including tribal and rural communities. Forward-looking planning combined with ongoing analyses and monitoring can help prepare for the expansion of geothermal energy and support continuous improvement of the technology. When considering siting and construction for these projects, comprehensive resource management and land use planning can help ensure that geothermal energy is deployed with minimal impacts to natural lands, cultural resources, recreation and other conservation values. Thoughtful planning and early, meaningful engagement with the people living near potential geothermal energy sources can improve projects, build community support, avoid unexpected conflicts and allow for smoother, more efficient infrastructure development. TNC's own research, including our reports and tools Smart from the Start, Power of Place, Site Renewables Right, Enabling a Community-Powered Energy Transition Voices of the West, and Renewable Energy in Nevada: A Literature Review of Potential Impacts, Design Criteria, and Mitigation of Impacts in the Western US have valuable insights and recommendations for planning and siting clean energy, some of which are applicable to geothermal. However, because the environmental and cultural impacts of geothermal

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energy production are site specific, more work needs to be done to better understand where these facilities might be sited and the implications for wildlife, habitat and communities.

This Administration and members of Congress on both sides of the aisle have indicated support for geothermal technology, such as closed-loop binary hydrothermal systems and next generation geothermal production. Among the suite of ideas that can support geothermal, TNC recommends that Congress consider taking the following actions to advance geothermal deployment:

- **Improve agency coordination -** With help from the U.S. Department of Energy Geothermal Technologies Office, Congress should publish an updated Gold Book and form a dedicated technical task force that could aid in expertise sharing. This can expedite the review and permit execution process across the U.S. Department of the Interior. These educational resources can inform those offices at the DOI that are less familiar with geothermal permitting while also increasing transparency through project tracking. This would provide developers with a set of clear expectations, establish processes and have the potential to shorten regulatory review timeframes.

- **Ensure adequate agency staffing -** The U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies involved in the geothermal permitting process should be adequately staffed with professionals who can ensure permits move forward accurately and as quickly as possible. Because geothermal projects require complex hydrogeologic baseline studies and in-depth knowledge of cultural and historic resources, agencies should ensure permitting teams are supported by knowledgeable hydrologists and cultural resource specialists.

- **Implement permitting reform -** Improving the permitting and environmental review process for geothermal projects would help completion at a pace that meets energy demand, improves reliability and affordability**,** and contributes to faster, better, more-informed decisions. If done right, permitting modernization will reduce conflicts, accelerate project timelines and lead to better outcomes for communities and conservation. Although geothermal power plants are relatively inexpensive to operate once constructed, the discovery phase requires expensive exploration and drilling, which can result in significant upfront permitting costs. Approximately 90% of conventional geothermal resources are located on federally managed lands, meaning most geothermal development requires an environmental review under the National Environmental Policy Act. How efficiently and effectively this review proceeds can vary, depending on the circumstances, the environment and the permitting approaches. TNC is supportive of the potential benefits of regulatory actions, such as programmatic

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environmental reviews or carefully crafted categorical exclusions for geothermal exploration. These types of steps would accelerate development of innovative projects, allowing field staff at federal agencies to leverage efficient permitting mechanisms for geothermal permitting. When done in a robust manner on the front end, subsequent permitting and environmental review processes can then rely on previous work to avoid duplicating analyses, shorten timelines, improve outcomes and reduce risks.

- **Follow the mitigation hierarchy –** To ensure that projects are sited with the least impact as possible to environmental and cultural resources, agencies should be directed to follow the mitigation hierarchy to avoid, minimize and, if necessary, mitigate impacts. Projects should first avoid causing harm to important habitat or places of cultural significance. When impacts cannot be avoided, geothermal projects should be planned, constructed and operated in a manner that minimizes impact. Any environmental or cultural loss that cannot be avoided or minimized should be mitigated with off-site conservation.

- **Research & development –** In order to maintain a leading edge on next-generation geothermal technologies, the federal government should support public and private research into key topics, such as subsurface mapping, deep drilling, materials development and equipment design, to accelerate geothermal deployment toward commercial scale deployment.

TNC is encouraged by Congress's interest in geothermal energy development and the many policy proposals that have been put forward. The House Committee on Natural Resources alone has seen nine bills proposed. As this Committee and Congress continue to explore supporting full scale deployment of geothermal resources, we encourage you to consider ways to accelerate this clean, abundant energy source while also taking care to ensure responsible practices, respect the input of local communities and protect nature. We appreciate this Committee's bipartisan leadership on this issue and look forward to working with you to advance these and other important clean energy solutions. Thank you for your consideration of our views, and I look forward to your questions.