

Regarding the Bear River Heritage Area Study Act

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present our testimony on behalf of the Bear River Heritage Area Study Act.

The Bear River Region of Northern Utah and Southeastern Idaho encompasses seven counties and approximately 13,700 square miles of rugged Rocky Mountain vistas, green valleys, and Great Basin desert expanses. The namesake Bear River stretches 350 miles from its headwaters in Eastern Utah, through Wyoming and Idaho, to its terminus in the Great Salt Lake, making it the longest river in North America with no outlet to an ocean.

From pre-Columbian Native Americans, the Shoshone Nations, European fur trappers and Overland Pioneers of the Western Frontier, to modern-day immigrants, refugees, traditional artisans and apprentices, and recreationalists, the Bear River corridor has blessed an arid region with the sustenance to thrive. It includes two National Wildlife Refuges, three National Forests, a National Grassland, the Golden Spike National Historic Park, and City of Rocks National Reserve. Thousands of native species of plants and wildlife call the area home along with hundreds of thousands of people of diverse origins.

The Bear River and surrounding region have unique stories, history, and folklore. We believe that these stories and the human experiences that have written and continue to write them are worth sharing and supporting, and that partnering with the National Park Service National Heritage Area program will allow us to harness the local interest and resources necessary to create a successful mechanism to educate our children and visitors from across the globe.

Assisting local businesses with growth and employee retention is one of the most efficient ways to promote economic diversification and success. According to the Edward Lowe Foundation, between 2005 and 2015, existing local businesses representing only 17% of the percent of US businesses created 35% of the jobs. Identifying small businesses that preserve cultural activities such as crafts and food and supporting them through management training, market development, and other technical assistance that monetize the cultural assets, not only retains and creates jobs, but conserves and perpetuates the cultural attributes that contribute significantly to our shared quality of life. These activities are even more important in remote rural communities and among minority groups where economic opportunities are limited. This additional financial support through successfully building income with heritage assets may mean the difference between staying in place and growing and sustaining a community, or relocating and retraining to other opportunities at the cost of losing connections to land and people.

Heritage tourism is also a critical component of our regional economic development strategy. According to a 2009 national research study on U.S. Cultural and Heritage Travel by Mandela Research, 78% of all U.S. leisure travelers participate in cultural and/or heritage activities while traveling, translating to 118.3 million adults per year. Cultural and heritage visitors spend, on average, \$994 per trip compared to \$611 for all U.S. travelers.

For 20 years, the Bear River Heritage Area has been functioning on a local level working towards National Heritage Area status. Although we have already accomplished much with invested local partners and resources, we recognize that there are still gaps to close in our ability to cohesively work together to conserve our heritage. Our local network is ready to leverage additional technical guidance and other resources provided by the National Park Service and National Heritage Area status is the missing piece to stabilize our activities and sustainably grow the services provided to stakeholders.

Passing the Bear River Heritage Area Study Act will be a critical next step in supporting the conservation and celebration of our regional heritage inasmuch as it will allow for the objective measurement of the interest and dedication of the resident stakeholders of our region and gauge the probability of sustainability following data-driven, informed decisions. The study will facilitate an inventory of the rich cultural and economic heritage resources of the area. This feasibility study will assist in the creation of a plan to leverage those resources into identifying and enhancing our natural and cultural legacy and expand the wealth-building opportunities associated with our heritage.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have. Contact me at (435) 713-1420 or brianc@brag.utah.gov at your convenience.