

Hearing: Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

Testimony of Stefanie Smallhouse

President of Arizona Farm Bureau

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Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and members of the committee: I want to thank you for inviting me to speak today. My name is Stefanie Smallhouse. My husband and I currently own and operate a cow/calf operation in the San Pedro River Valley. We are the fifth generation on the ranch and hope to pass it onto the sixth. I am also the President of the Arizona Farm Bureau Federation, which represents more than 2,300 farmers and ranchers across our state. On behalf of those members, I appreciate this opportunity to express my concern about the Great Bend of the Gila Conservation Area proposed by H.R. 8719.

Living and working in rural Arizona, I have a unique understanding of the environmental and cultural value that Arizona's public lands have to offer. I also have a unique understanding of the challenges that federal land use restrictions impose on those who seek to manage and steward public lands. Federal law mandates that our nation manage its public lands for multiple use. Conservation area and wilderness criteria threaten the multiple use of public lands by restricting grazing, mineral extraction, and resource harvesting. They also prohibit the deployment of motorized tools and mechanized vehicles, severely limiting the effectiveness of watershed management, trail maintenance, soil treatment, noxious weed control, waste management and fire protection.

The proposed Great Bend of the Gila Conservation Area and wilderness expansion proposed by H.R. 8719 would threaten sound management of an area that supports grazing, sand and gravel saleable minerals, and contains transmission lines that may one day support renewable solar energy production. The area also overlaps with popular hunting and outdoor recreation areas already managed by state and local governments. By creating two new national conservation areas and expanding wilderness areas by tens of thousands of acres, this bill will remove options for sound land management and limit the scope of critical private partnerships.

Moreover, the cultural and environmental resources contemplated by this measure are already under significant protection. Arizona is currently home to 24 national monuments and parks. Conservation areas in Arizona comprise more than 111,000 acres, a significant portion of the nearly 50 percent of Arizona's land that is federally controlled. Less than 20 percent of our state's land area is privately owned, and this bill would increase federal land management by more than 430,000 acres. With private and state land already encumbered, any proposed expansion of federal land management is met with great concern for long-term environmental and economic sustainability.

Finally, I have serious concerns about the impact this bill would have on livestock grazing. Public lands grazing is integral to ranches in Arizona and across the West. H.R. 8719 would restrict grazing within the conservation and wilderness areas to its current footprint, leaving no room for expanding that footprint in ways consistent with environmental and ecological conditions. Livestock grazing is critical to for managing and preventing invasive plant species, decreasing hazardous fuel loads to prevent wildfires, supporting wildlife habitats, and cultivating viable rural economies. The restrictions outlined in this bill would severely limit the effectiveness of grazing as a critical land management tool, setting a dangerous precedent for future land use restrictions and threatening a critical aspect of our nation's food supply.

Public lands are critical to the success of agriculture, and agricultural managers are likewise critical partners for the preservation of public lands. In relation to prior iterations of this bill, we have expressed serious concerns over a top-down approach to imposing restrictions with major impacts on farmers and ranchers. While we remain opposed to H.R. 8719, we appreciate that we have now been given the opportunity to express our concerns about the expansion of wilderness and conservation areas. Furthermore, we remain committed to working alongside federal land management agencies for the benefit of all whose livelihood depends on our nation's natural resources.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak today and look forward to answering any questions.