

PERSHING COUNTY  
BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS



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**Testimony of**

**Pershing County, a political subdivision of the State of Nevada**

**House Subcommittee on Federal Lands**

**Subcommittee Hearing**

**HR 3173, the Northern Nevada Economic Development and Conservation Act of 2023**

**March 7, 2024**

Chairman Tiffany and Ranking Member Neguse, on behalf of Pershing County, Nevada, please accept for the official record the testimony of R. Bryce Shields, Pershing County District Attorney, in support of HR 3173, the Northern Nevada Economic Development and Conservation Act of 2023. We express our sincere appreciation to Congressman Mark Amodei for his unflagging efforts, support, and dedication to this important legislation. While Pershing County endorses HR 3173 in its entirety, we submit this testimony specifically in support of Title VI of the bill, the Pershing County Economic Development and Conservation provisions.

For the last twenty (20) years, the Pershing County Board of Commissioners (the "BOC"), together with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, has sought the resolution of Pershing County's long-standing public lands issues and concomitant economic woes, a veritable Gordian knot. HR 3173 represents a culmination of those united efforts, standing as a testament to the power of grassroots organization and collaborative bipartisan decision making. We believe that Title VI cuts this Gordian knot, accomplishing three equally important objectives: 1) Providing a rational, planned resolution to problems associated with checkerboard ownership patterns; 2) Promoting favorable conditions for economic development and efficient resource management; and 3) Protecting Pershing County lands that are truly wild, along with the County's rural heritage.

**Rationalizing the Checkboard, Promoting Economic Development, and Efficient Resource Management**

Nevada's checkerboard ownership pattern, which is strewn across a 40-mile-wide swath of land on each side of Interstate 80 in Pershing County, strains proper BLM management of public lands and restricts public access to checkerboard lands due to the mixture of privately owned parcels. The lack of access to lands within the checkerboard operates as an economic barrier to the County's ability to attract and guide development into sustainable patterns, which in turn restricts

the County's tax base. Compounding the problem, the Federal Government owns 75.6% of the land within Pershing County leaving only 24.4% available for ad valorem taxation. Thus, of the small percentage of land subject to ad valorem taxation in Pershing County, an even smaller percentage is suitable for development sufficient to yield tax proceeds of significant value.

Title VI or HR 3173 provides a solution to land management and development challenges by directing the sale or exchange of public lands within the checkerboard at fair market value. The proceeds of these transactions will be distributed as follows:

- 1) 85% to Nevada's BLM to be used for "willing seller" land purchases in Pershing County for conservation, wildlife habitat, recreation, and preservation of other cultural and ecological resources;
- 2) 10% to the Pershing County budget;
- 3) 5% to the state of Nevada general education fund per current law.

The proceeds of sales should afford the BLM the opportunity to block up federal land holdings in sensitive areas more appropriate for conservation, recreation, and species habitat and control. In turn, the consolidation of federal property under BLM management, along with increased funding from the proceeds of sales, will likely enable the BLM to achieve a thriving natural ecological balance on public lands in accordance with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act.

Additionally, the sale or exchange of checkerboard lands will likely encourage development in communities along the Interstate 80 corridor within Pershing County by creating, for the first time, the prospect of contiguous parcels of private property within the checkerboard in areas suitable for development, i.e., areas in proximity to the power grid, rail transport, and Interstate 80. Several businesses including Coeur Mining, New Nevada Lands, renewable energy developers, and a data center project have expressed interest in acquiring and consolidating blocks of private ownership within the checkerboard. Such development is crucial to expanding the County's tax base and bringing jobs to our economically stressed region.

### **Protecting Pershing County's Wildlands and Rural Heritage**

Title VI designates approximately 136,072 acres of BLM wilderness within the following areas of Pershing County: Cain Mountain (formerly Augusta Mountain), Bluewing, Fencemaker, Grandfather's (China Mountain and the Tobin Range), Mount Limbo, and North Sahwave. In exchange, the bill releases roughly 48,600 acres of Wilderness Study Areas throughout the County.

As stewards of Pershing County's unique landscape, we support and recommend the designation of these areas as wilderness. Each of the seven areas under consideration represents some of the most beautiful lands in Pershing County, offering excellent wildlife habitat, spectacular scenery, and solitude. Many of these areas sustain the legacy of rural Northern Nevada, as the Bluewing, Fencemaker, Grandfather, and Mount Limbo support watersheds vital to important ranches that

have thrived in Pershing County for over 100 years. These lands are worthy of preservation for future generations.

We invite the Subcommittee to consider that each proposed area was handpicked through a collaborative process consisting of diverse stakeholders including the BOC, corporate citizens, conservationists, exploration geologists, landowners, miners, ranchers, recreationists, sportsmen, and more. These designations enjoy the unanimous support of both the BOC and others who live, work, and recreate in Pershing County. We urge Congress to respect the wishes of those who know the land and designate the proposed areas as wilderness.

As validation of our recommendation, it is worth noting that Congress designated the portions of Cain Mountain that fall within Churchill and Lander Counties as wilderness under the National Defense Authorization Act of 2023. On that basis, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the portion of Cain Mountain lying within Pershing County should likewise be designated as wilderness under Title VI of HR 3173. Moreover, because the remaining six areas under consideration in Pershing County share the same characteristics as Cain Mountain, they too should be designated as wilderness.

In closing, Pershing County appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HR 3173 and the Pershing provisions. We view this legislation as vital to the economic prosperity of Pershing County and the preservation of our lands for future generations. We urge the Subcommittee to pass this important bill this year. Please contact Bryce Shields at (775) 273-2613 or [bshields@pershingcountynv.gov](mailto:bshields@pershingcountynv.gov) if you have any questions regarding our views on HR 3173.

Thank you,



R. Bryce Shields  
Pershing County District Attorney