



Testimony of I Ling Thompson, Chief Executive Officer

Foundation for America's Public Lands

“All in for America250: Public-Private Partnerships Supporting America's Semi-
Quincentennial on our Public Lands”

House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight

Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Dexter, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is I Ling Thompson, and I have the distinct honor of serving as the inaugural CEO of the Foundation for America's Public Lands, the congressionally chartered charitable partner of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). I am here today with a simple message. The Bureau of Land Management and the lands it manages are critically important facets of the well-being of our country. The Foundation exists to help the BLM do more: to operate with greater effectiveness and agility, and to deepen engagement with communities and partners — all without expanding bureaucracy.

This work has never been more relevant or necessary than at this moment, as we commemorate our Nation's 250th anniversary and look ahead to stewarding America's public lands and waters for the next 250 years.

About the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

America's public lands and waters are where we work, adventure into the great outdoors, and experience the rich history and culture of America. These special places are more than destinations on a map or scenic backdrops — they are some of the hardest working lands in the country. Our public lands and waters sustain us.

They provide essential goods and services to the American people, including food and fiber, clean air and drinking water, recreational and cultural opportunities, habitat for fish and wildlife, energy and mineral production, and forage and timber. These lands and

waters are powerful economic drivers, fueling job growth and creating opportunities in rural communities across this great Nation.

This is particularly true of the public lands and waters managed by the BLM. The BLM has a uniquely outsized role in stewarding America's heritage, economy, and natural resources. It manages some of the most beautiful places across our country. BLM traces its roots back to the establishment of the General Land Office (GLO) in 1812. The GLO was the precursor to the BLM and served a vital role in America's westward expansion, aiding in the needs of the public as they developed their homesteads across the Great Plains, Southwest, and West Coast. These lands, now managed by the BLM, were the ancestral homelands of many Indigenous peoples impacted at this time. In 1934, Congress identified an additional need for public lands. It created the U.S. Grazing Service (Service) under the Taylor Grazing Act in the wake of the Dust Bowl years. The Service was responsible for managing livestock grazing on public lands to end severe overgrazing that was jeopardizing rural farmland. And finally, in 1946, Congress merged the GLO with the Service to create the BLM.

Today, the BLM is the largest federal land manager, managing one-tenth of America's land base that includes over 245 million acres and 700 million additional acres of subsurface minerals, more than any other U.S. government agency. For context, the BLM manages almost as much public land as the National Forest Service and the National Park Service combined and offers arguably the largest breadth of outdoor recreation opportunities in America.

The BLM has nearly 450,000 miles of routes and trails and 2,700 miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers available for Americans to enjoy, as well as 30 National Monuments. And enjoy them they do – the BLM hit record visitation in 2025, tracking nearly 84 million visits. BLM lands offer invaluable outdoor access for visitors of all ages, backgrounds, and interests. No matter if you are a rock climber or an off-roading rock crawler; you prefer off-grid boondocking or camping close to restrooms with your family; or you seek the thrill of whitewater kayaking or the slow meander of a multi-day rafting experience, there is a recreation area that meets those needs.

The outdoor recreation economy generated \$1.2 trillion in economic output in 2024, and it is more complex and robust than a single trip can capture. On public lands, you can enjoy the adrenaline of a mountain bike ride for an hour or a week-long adventure; practice sighting in your rifle at a target shooting area; or experience history along the Pony Express and BLM's more than 6,000 miles of National Scenic and Historic Trails – and then book a stay in a neighboring small town. You can catch a glimpse of wild horses and burros on one of the 175 Herd Management Areas, where the BLM is charged with managing herds across

25.6 million acres for the health of the animals and the ecosystems. It's often said that if you like to hunt and fish, you must love the BLM for its big game wintering habitat and unparalleled Western rivers. The BLM provides this for the American people, while also balancing industry use of resources within these lands.

Unique from the other federal land management agencies, BLM's mission is defined by Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), which directs the agency to carry out a complex dual mandate: that of managing public lands for multiple uses while conserving natural, historical, and cultural resources for current and future generations. This responsibility — to ensure multiple use and sustained yield — is at the core of the Bureau's mission. Far from an abstract concept, BLM specialists manage a vast and complex portfolio of uses across our public lands, including: leasing for domestic energy development on 12.4 million acres, supporting more than 91,000 oil and gas wells; overseeing 40,000 active and abandoned mine sites; administering more than 3,400 developed recreation sites and roughly 4,200 commercial use permits, primarily for guide and outfitting purposes; and managing 155 million acres of rangelands that sustain livestock grazing to help feed the country.

The Bureau carries out this work while simultaneously safeguarding the health and long-term sustainability of public lands and waters for present and future generations. This multiple-use mandate is what makes the BLM a \$250 billion economic engine for the Nation, supporting nearly 950,000 jobs nationwide — and establishing the BLM as a true powerhouse for America.

The breadth and depth of its multiple-use, sustained-yield mandate also make BLM the Nation's largest and most important neighbor. This land is commonly intermixed and adjacent to other private, federal, state, and local jurisdictions, making partnerships and collaboration crucial. This is particularly evident as prolonged droughts, invasive species, and wildfires threaten countless communities, the recreation economy, and rangelands that support America's ranchers and wildlife.

Given its historical and current use, it is clear that BLM oversees some of the hardest working lands in America. Yet, despite its significance to the Nation, the full value of BLM's work remains underrecognized. The Bureau operates with the smallest discretionary appropriation of any federal land management agency. Public awareness of BLM and the lands it manages lags far behind that of its federal counterparts, with a recent national survey showing that only 17% of Americans know what the BLM does. At the same time, pressure on BLM lands continues to grow. The need for affordable energy and critical minerals is increasing; drought, fire, and invasive species threaten the health of our

rangelands and the recreation economy; and visitation has risen by more than 40% over the last decade.

Establishing the Bureau of Land Management's Nonprofit Partner

To help address these challenges, the Foundation for America's Public Lands (the Foundation) was established by Congress in 2017 to form strategic partnerships and raise private funds on behalf of the BLM's multiple-use, sustained-yield mission. The Foundation works to raise awareness, increase access, and inspire stewardship of the more than 245 million acres managed by the Bureau. Initially named the Bureau of Land Management Foundation in the establishment legislation, the Foundation received funding to set up operations in January 2022.

The Foundation is the youngest of the charitable foundations created by Congress to accelerate private partnerships and catalyze funding to address long-standing needs and challenges on federal public lands — and we are already capitalizing on significant opportunities to do so.

Since joining the Foundation as its first employee and first CEO, I have worked closely with the BLM, our nine-person Board of Directors, and our 11-person National Leadership Council to establish the Foundation as a collaborative, solutions-oriented partner that works with stakeholders and communities to address pressing issues on BLM lands. We set the biggest table possible to inform and guide our work, as evidenced by the breadth of experiences and geographies on our Board of Directors and National Leadership Council. They bring with them professional expertise in the public and private sectors, as well as a network of philanthropic connections.

Thanks to the support of our leadership and partners, the Foundation has deployed \$11.5 million in funding toward 50 projects that advance recreation access, improve rangeland health, and encourage shared stewardship and volunteerism across BLM-managed lands and waters. Public-private partnerships are the bedrock of our work. The Foundation has been able to achieve a 1:1 leverage of private dollars, making every federal dollar go further for the BLM.

Our project investments are already bringing much-needed attention and resources to many underinvested rural Western communities where in many cases, if not for our grants, the projects might still be stalled. I have seen firsthand that many projects are backed by incredible community leaders who have the vision, energy, and support for solutions that they believe will make their communities better. What stands in the way is access to the right partners and funding. The Foundation has stepped up as a funder, a catalyst, and a

connector to elevate these great ideas and match them with the right partners to bring real dollars to the table.

In just two years, the Foundation has provided grants to support community-led projects that address long-standing challenges and unlock new opportunities, including:

- Resolving bureaucratic barriers, such as working with the State of Utah to fund a traffic study needed to open a new BLM campground (Beas Lewis), helping reduce visitor pressure on Capitol Reef National Park.
- Piloting innovative virtual fencing technology across 230,000 acres in Idaho, New Mexico, Colorado and California, supporting ranchers, improving rangeland health, and increasing operational efficiency.
- Advancing practical multiple-use solutions, including reducing cattle-recreation conflicts at Cotoni Coast Dairies in Santa Cruz, CA; funding research and stakeholders collaboration to identify solutions to responsibly manage wild horses and burros; and supporting a Southern Arizona collaborative to help ensure drought resilience for drinking water supplies, military readiness, wildlife, and the recreation economy.
- Implementing Congressional directives, including the EXPLORE Act, by improving recreational shooting sites in southern Arizona; upgrading signage, shelters, and cabins across Alaska's White Mountains National Recreation Area to enhance access to 250 miles of trails; and constructing an accessible trail at Scratchgravel Hills near Helena, MT.
- Closing critical funding gaps through private investment, including helping the town of Silverton, CO, secure the match needed to unlock \$1.5 million for a 30-mile, multiple-use trail to support its recreation economy.
- Responding quickly to public needs, including reducing user conflicts at Wilson Creek in Boise, ID; funding engineering work to restore trails at Rio Grande del Norte National Monument in Taos, NM; and supporting rural Colorado communities by planning improvements to river safety and access.
- Helping the BLM support neighboring communities, including funding post-fire restoration to reduce flood risks and protect water quality and infrastructure in Moab, UT; and providing privately funded safety equipment for wildland firefighters protecting public lands and nearby communities.

This is a small snapshot of how public-private partnerships and funding can make an impact on the ground now and into the future. The Foundation currently has a pipeline of 40 more shovel-ready projects (and growing) that will uplift stewardship and recreation access in the years ahead. This offers a roadmap for future investments that will ensure public lands managed by BLM meet the needs of current and future generations.

And We're Just Getting Started

These opportunities for partnership are possible through our Congressional authorization. In addition, H.R.4044 - Foundation for America's Public Lands Reauthorization Act, introduced by Congressmen Blake Moore and Joe Neguse, would allow the Foundation to continue our mission and activities at the scale and effectiveness Congress envisioned. Reauthorization would:

- Level up the Foundation's appropriation from \$1 million to up to \$10 million, providing funding that is crucial to unlocking the power of partnerships and leveraging federal funding. This level puts the Foundation on par with other congressionally authorized public land foundations.
- Expand the size of the Board of Directors from 9 to 18, ensuring the Board has representation that is bipartisan, geographically represented, and reflects the full spectrum of multiple use as the Foundation expands its impact. Increasing the Board is aligned with peer Congressionally chartered Foundations.

In less than five years of operation, the Foundation has uncovered abundant opportunity to improve the legacy of the BLM and its services to the American people. The BLM currently has a \$6.6 billion maintenance backlog that is difficult for the government alone to tackle. Thanks to public support, the BLM has benefited from \$26 million in volunteer hours to support stewardship needs. But we need so much more support to do this important work. It's only by joining in partnerships that reach across industries and private philanthropy that we can help close this gap as the BLM's connector and catalyst.

America has an incredible portfolio of public lands to enjoy and sustain our economy. Honoring America's semi-quincentennial anniversary creates an opportunity to bring more partners to the table. It is a privilege to lead this organization, and I look forward to working with Congress on the important work ahead that will benefit future generations 250 years from now.