

TESTIMONY OF DONALD A. SIMPSON
VICE PRESIDENT, PUBLIC LANDS FOUNDATION
THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES;
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS;
ATTENTION: PUBLIC WITNESS TESTIMONY
FISCAL YEAR 2021 BUDGET – BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
February 6, 2020

We thank you for this opportunity to present the Subcommittee with the Public Land Foundation's (PLF) views regarding the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) budget for FY 2021. As a national, non-profit organization with more than 600 members, comprised principally of retired BLM employees, the PLF has a unique body of experience, expertise and knowledge of public land management. As retirees, we believe we offer an objective and non-partisan view of what is currently happening on the public lands managed by the BLM. The PLF supports the BLM and its programs, but we are independent in our views and requests. We strive to improve the effectiveness of the BLM by 1) encouraging professionalism of its employees, 2) increasing the public's understanding of and support for the multiple-use management of the public lands, and 3) promoting scientific management of lands administered by the BLM.

BLM Overview

The BLM manages the most diverse landscapes in the Nation's portfolio. The agency manages approximately 245 million acres of land and 700 million acres of mineral estate from the north slope of Alaska to Jupiter Inlet in Florida. These lands are habitat for thousands of species of plants and animals, provide clean water, scenic beauty, and solitude. Many of these lands are of Tribal significance and include cultural and historic resources. They also provide the Nation with wealth from its many resources including oil and gas, coal, renewable energy, non-energy minerals, all types of recreation, forage for livestock, and timber. According to the *BLM's A Sound Investment for America 2019* report, during FY 2018 these lands generated \$105 billion in economic output and supported 471,000 jobs.

These lands are vital to the many rural communities throughout the West that are intermixed with these lands and whose citizens work and recreate on the lands. These uses and values can only be achieved when there is some balance between energy development and other programs, such as wildlife, livestock grazing, forest management, and recreation to provide for the diversity of uses and maintenance of healthy, resilient landscapes.

Budget Overview

The PLF recognizes and appreciates the difficult decisions that must be made by the Congress and the Administration to allocate scarce dollars to programs that generate the best economic and social returns to the American taxpayers. The President's Fiscal Year 2021 Budget proposal, having not yet been released, leaves us not knowing the Administration's priorities for the upcoming year for the BLM. The PLF believes the budget should prioritize programs that provide for healthy, resilient landscapes; the conservation of species dependent on the diverse

habitat the BLM manages; economic benefits to the Nation and to the rural communities dependent on the BLM-managed public lands; all forms of energy and associated transmission; and the safety of communities these lands surround and the public that lives nearby.

Program areas of importance to the PLF

1. Balanced Energy Development. We believe the Subcommittee should support the sustainable and balanced development of both traditional and renewable energy resources, including solar, wind, and geothermal energy resources on the public lands along with the associated infrastructure (pipeline and transmission). The PLF specifically acknowledges the BLM for the recent approval of the Desert Quartzite solar project in California and release of the Final EIS for the Gemini solar project in Nevada. The BLM, however, needs to more aggressively move forward with the expansion of renewable energy designated leasing areas and competitive leasing for additional solar and wind energy development projects. Energy and infrastructure development on the public lands is part of the multiple-use mandate for the BLM under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and also supports economic growth, energy independence, jobs in our rural communities, and generates revenues for federal and state treasuries and local economies.

It is critically important that sufficient funds are provided to not only support the leasing and permitting activities for environmentally responsible energy development, but also for land use planning, resource assessments, NEPA reviews, program management, and inspection and compliance activities. This will assure that development is complying with laws, regulations and lease terms. The development of energy resources and associated infrastructure on the public lands affects other resources and must be balanced as to time and scale of development. Funding for other high value programs can help mitigate and offset some of the effects of energy development. An example would be funding to support the implementation of conservation practices for sage grouse under the west-wide habitat management plans that are potentially affected by energy and infrastructure development. It is also important that the BLM revisit the compensatory mitigation policy for development activities on the public lands (IM 2019-018, issued December 6, 2018) that limits the use of offsite mitigation tools to help reduce the landscape-level impacts from this development.

The BLM released a Final EIS for leasing in the 1002 Area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in September 2019, and is expected to issue a Decision and conduct an oil and gas lease sale this year. The PLF requests that the 2021 budget provide sufficient funds to ensure environmental review, monitoring, and inspections of exploration and development.

2. Sage Grouse Habitat. As the West has become urbanized over the last 100 years, large areas of sagebrush have been impacted resulting in significant sage grouse population declines. Although it is a state-managed species that depends on the sagebrush-steppe habitat to survive, BLM manages large areas of the habitat across the Western states and must be in lock step with management strategies of the western states. The PLF recommends increased funding for the BLM to coordinate activities on public lands with state agencies, stakeholders

and partners to improve and restore habitat that has been damaged by wildfire, weed invasions, and development. Conserving and restoring habitat for sage grouse will also enhance populations of elk, mule deer, golden eagles and hundreds of sagebrush dependent species. Healthy sagebrush habitats also maintain vibrant ranching communities dependent on these habitats and a thriving outdoor recreation economy.

There are many landscape initiatives throughout the west that deal with large scale habitat improvement. Funding has been nearly eliminated for these efforts over the past few years. The PLF recommends reviving the funding for these healthy lands partnerships. These landscape scale initiatives are a bargain for the public because the local and state partners participate and match funding. For example, the Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative (WLCI) provided for a leverage of \$6 for every one Federal dollar appropriated. Over a ten-year period from 2007 to 2017 the WLCI protected 93,000 acres of sagebrush habitat through easements and forage reserves and almost 100,000 acres were revegetated or treated to eliminate invasive species or rejuvenate decadent vegetation.

3. Wild Horse and Burros. The overpopulation of wild horses and burros on the range, now nearly four times target management levels, is past the critical point and is doing irreparable harm to the land, vegetation, wildlife, and horses and burros themselves. The PLF has been working as a partner with a broad coalition of diverse stakeholders that are seeking a solution to the problem. The only viable approach for resolution is the implementation of a consistently funded multi-year strategy that entails aggressive removals, broad scale annual application of fertility control, novel efforts to increase adoptions such as BLM's recent incentive program, and pasturing of unadopted animals. The Committee has requested a plan based on this approach be submitted by BLM. Absent the submission of this plan we recommend that the Committee at a minimum retain the 2020 funding level for the wild horse and burro program and if the plan is submitted, increase funding levels to begin implementation. This approach to management is supported by national animal welfare organizations, wildlife organizations, land conservation groups, livestockmen and is in step with management approaches identified by Congressman Stewart's Wild Horse and Burro Roundtable. It is imperative that the Federal funding not be reduced, and that the aggressive program of removals, fertility control, adoptions and pasturing of animals that has been initiated be increased. Any backtracking on these efforts endorsed by the stakeholders will stop the forward momentum to begin lowering the populations commensurate with the appropriate management level.

4. Recreation. The western states populations are increasing at a very rapid pace. This is placing a significant demand on the public lands for recreation opportunities. This includes anything from hiking, to biking, to hunting, to driving OHVs and everything in between. In FY 2018 the public lands provided 68 million recreation visits with an economic output of nearly \$7 billion to the western state's economies. We recommend that the Subcommittee increase subactivity funding for recreation, wildlife, fisheries, and land restoration along with the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which was recently reauthorized by Congress. This will allow BLM to maintain and add recreation opportunities, secure easements for access to landlocked public lands, and restore degraded lands to improve wildlife and fisheries habitat.

5. Wildlife Migration Corridors. The BLM has been working with State Wildlife agencies to identify wildlife migration corridors for species such as mule deer, elk, and pronghorn antelope. Funding should be provided to continue and expand this effort. These are very small amounts of public land but are very crucial for these species to travel between their winter and summer habitats.

6. Headquarters Functional Elimination. The Secretary of the Interior announced the movement of the BLM Headquarters employees from Washington, D.C. to 11 different western locations last summer. The Director, Assistant Directors, and a few immediate staff are to be located in Grand Junction, Colorado. All other staff will be scattered throughout the west. The PLF opposed this proposal as it will functionally eliminate the agency's headquarters. The result will be the largest Federal land management agency with no seat at the table in Washington, D.C. as policy, procedures, and budgets are developed. We strongly believe the BLM Headquarters, with only 3 percent of the BLM total workforce, should be located in the Washington, D.C. area so that it can continue to provide budget, policy and oversight support to the Department, Administration, Congress, Office of Management and Budget, and other closely aligned Federal agencies.

At this point the move is beginning. Employees have received their directed reassignment letters and the vast majority have or will leave the agency -- a huge brain drain. Nearly 75% of the Washington Office leadership positions are currently vacant as a result of this move. These positions include several Assistant Directors, Deputy Assistant Directors, Division Chiefs, Deputy Division Chiefs and Branch Chiefs. In addition, the BLM Budget Officer position is currently vacant as is the Chief of Staff position. We have heard numerous reports of chaos in the organization with the large number of vacancies and that both BLM field office staffs and external stakeholders are having difficulties contacting Headquarters resource program leaders and staffs. There appears to be no Continuity of Operations Plan in place as significant numbers of experienced staff have left. For example, there is uncertainty as to where and how to forward official records among the numerous office locations. We recommend that funding be eliminated for the continuation of this action in FY 2021 and that significant Congressional oversight occur by both House and Senate Appropriations and Authorizing Committees during FY 2020.

We appreciate the hard choices that this Subcommittee has before it. The Nation faces many challenges, all of which require funding. The public lands managed by the BLM and other public lands are a good investment that can provide positive returns to the Treasury as well as many amenities that contribute to the wellbeing of the American people. These lands are the lifeblood of many communities and provide economic development in commodities, recreation, cultural identity, and many other benefits.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the PLF's priorities for the BLM FY 2021 Budget.

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