

Statement of Interior Subcommittee Chairman Mike Simpson
Bureau of Land Management
Director Bob Abbey
March 10, 2011

The Committee will come to order.

Mr. Abbey, I'd like to welcome you to today's subcommittee hearing addressing the fiscal year 2012 budget priorities for the Bureau of Land Management.

My colleagues and I hope to cover a lot of ground with you today on the new Wild Lands policy, grazing, wild horses and burros, energy and other issues. While I don't agree with all of the BLM's priorities in this budget, I appreciate the fact that we can have a productive conversation about these issues.

I'd like to begin by making several points on a few specific issues before we receive your testimony.

First, as we've discussed, Western Members, including myself, are very concerned about the new Wild Lands policy. I believe this is a troubling precedent, and, as I told Secretary Salazar earlier this week, any bill that comes out of this subcommittee this year will include language to de-fund the Wild Lands policy, whether it is included in the base bill or amended on the House floor.

Secondly, it seems that this budget chooses the full funding of land acquisition and America's Great Outdoors at the expense of other important programs—like the operating account Management of Land and Resources which actually supports private sector jobs in grazing, forestry, mining and oil & gas development. As you know, I support the Land and Water Conservation, but it doesn't make sense to me that we would fully fund land acquisition by diverting money from land management accounts. With our current budget crisis, I find it irresponsible that the BLM requests \$50 million for land acquisition and \$1 billion for America's

Great Outdoors when it can't manage the land is already holds and has significant problems with many of its current programs.

I'm deeply concerned that this proposal will exacerbate an already out-of-control problem facing the BLM, and that is the increasing cost of litigation. When you shift resources from land management to acquisitions, you are unable to provide the land managers in your field offices with the resources they need to make environmentally sound decisions, leaving the door wide open to environmental groups looking for any opportunity to sue.

I've said this before, but it bears repeating—if there are any certain things in life, they are death, taxes, and the fact that the BLM will be sued on any decision it makes.

It doesn't take an expert accountant to figure out that a large amount of your budget is spent fighting lawsuits in court or attempting to bulletproof your decisions against an inevitable lawsuit. These dollars represent a tremendous amount of taxpayer funding that is being shifted away from on-the-ground management and spent instead in courtrooms. That is a bad deal for public lands, a bad deal for your agency, and a bad deal for taxpayers. Even more troubling is the net result that our public lands are increasingly managed by judges while your professional staff and their judgment are being undermined.

I know you recognize this problem, as do your employees who are on the front lines of this battle every day in Idaho and other Western states. Yet I'm very concerned that this budget fails to put adequate resources on the ground to address this situation.

On that note, I'm very concerned that the BLM in Idaho won't be able to hire the seasonal workers needed for grazing and recreation management. Many of the ranchers in my district have been told they won't be able to turn-out their livestock until late-June.

This has a significant impact on the bottom line of a ranching operation and could mean the difference between finishing the year in the red or black. These basic, important responsibilities of the BLM need to be met before it considers other program increases. Mr. Abbey, I hope to work with you on this issue to solve this problem.

The hardrock mining proposal in the budget is also problematic. Though I believe revising the General Mining Law of 1872 is long overdue, this should be carefully reviewed by the authorizing committees. Similar to the oil & gas legislative proposals, the budget would basically raise taxes on hardrock mining and use the proceeds to fund land acquisition.

I also want to briefly mention the potential merging of the BLM Forestry and Range staff in an effort to improve efficiencies. This seems like a solution in search of a problem. Forestry and Range programs have different authorizing statutes and different staff and expertise. Both programs are very important to the day to day operations of the BLM. I hope that you reconsider merging these two programs.

In closing, I look forward to working with you on many of these issues and thank you and your staff for their hard work and assistance.

With that, I'm happy to yield to the gentleman from Virginia, Mr. Moran for any opening remarks he may have.

(Mr. Moran remarks)

Mr. Abbey, we look forward to your testimony. You may proceed.