

Chairman Mike Simpson
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations
Hearing on FY14 Bureau of Land Management Budget
Principal Deputy Director Neil Kornze
May 7, 2013
Opening Statement as Prepared

The Committee will come to order.

Principal Deputy Director Kornze, I'd like to welcome you to today's subcommittee hearing addressing the fiscal year 2014 budget priorities for the Bureau of Land Management.

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

As I stated last year, I'm disappointed with the proposed decrease in range management and especially the new fee of \$1 per animal unit month. For several years, starting in 2009, I have been working with the BLM to permanently reduce the backlog of grazing permits. Nonetheless, the BLM is still losing ground. In FY14, the BLM's goal is to complete 33% of grazing permit renewals. While I understand the workload of permit renewals fluctuates from year to year, this level of completion is not acceptable, particularly given this subcommittee's focus on the issue.

Further, as I pointed out last year, the \$1 fee per AUM is a 74% increase, which is totally unreasonable. I'm not opposed to discussing the AUM fee--we all know its low--however, a 74% increase is a huge shock to livestock producers. Just like other small businesses, livestock producers need certainty--they need to know their grazing permits will be renewed in a timely fashion and that fees won't dramatically increase from year to year. The FY14 President's Budget is an improvement from the FY13 President's Budget, but more needs to be done to deal with all of the challenges facing range management and livestock grazing. A \$1 per AUM fee is not the solution.

As I say nearly every year now, I am disappointed with the budget gimmicks that are a mainstay of the BLM budget. From grazing fees to numerous oil and gas fees, this makes our job difficult as we have to find the funds to offset these proposals--many of which are simply non-starters in the House of Representatives. Particularly confusing is the fee for non-producing leases. Last year the President's budget proposed a \$4 per acre fee for non-producing leases. This year that proposal is \$6 per acre. Non-producing oil and gas leases already pay rental fees—I don't understand how this proposal isn't duplicative of the rental fee. Instead of playing these games, I prefer to work in a constructive way with the Bureau to solve problems. I suspect these games come from OMB and not from the BLM itself.

I commend the BLM for taking a proactive approach on the conservation of the sage grouse and this priority is rightly reflected in the proposed budget. That said, I want to make sure this investment will actually improve sage grouse habitat and prevent the specie from being listed in 2015, which would be devastating across the West. Now more than ever we need to see a return on this investment, not just wasting this funding on planning exercises that don't help us reach our goal. I want to make sure that

the agency has the time and resources to meet the court-imposed listing deadline, and I'll need your help with that.

As we all know after the last fire season, the greatest threat to sage grouse is wildfire. Two million acres of priority sage grouse habitat burned in wildfires. Related to wildfire are invasive species—especially cheat grass. While the BLM is focusing on sage grouse, it seems the agency is looking mostly at limiting existing uses rather than controlling cheat grass and preventing fires. I mentioned to former Secretary Salazar that I am very concerned by the cut in hazardous fuels funding for the Department. Mr. Kornze, I hope the BLM will start looking at being more proactive rather than reactive. Last year's fire season shows us that no matter how much we limit existing uses of public lands, wildfires could easily be the nail in the coffin for sage grouse listing. This is a top priority for me—and we need to work together on a real solution.

Finally, I couldn't hold a BLM hearing without mentioning litigation. When I raised this issue with outgoing Secretary Salazar a couple of months ago, he responded that he was, at the time, the defendant in 3,000 lawsuits. Three thousand! That number alone tells you we have a problem with frivolous lawsuits, and I continue to be very concerned about the cost of litigation to the Bureau and the taxpayers. The Department is finally starting to track Equal Access to Justice Act payments, but we still need much more sunlight on this issue. We need to know the true cost of litigation to the Bureau and this should be part of the budget justification submitted every year. American's deserve to know these costs and how their tax dollars are spent.

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.

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