

TESTIMONY OF EDWARD W. SHEPARD, PRESIDENT, PUBLIC LANDS FOUNDATION
THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED
AGENCIES; COMMITTEE OF APPROPRIATIONS;
ATTENTION: OUSTSIDE WITNESS TESTIMONY
FISCAL YEAR 2016 BUDGET – BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

March 18, 2015

MR. CHAIRMAN

We thank you for this opportunity to present your committee with our views regarding the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) budget request for FY 2016. As a national, non-profit organization with more than 700 members, comprised principally of retired, but still dedicated, BLM employees, the Public Lands Foundation (PLF) has a unique body of experience, expertise and knowledge of public land management. As retirees, we believe we offer an objective and non-bureaucratic view of what is currently happening on the National System of Public Lands (NSPL). 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 proper management of the NSPL, and 3) promoting scientific management of lands administered by the BLM.

Overview

The BLM manages the most diverse landscapes in the Nation's portfolio; providing stewardship to approximately 247 million acres of land and 700 million acres of mineral estate from the north slope of Alaska to Jupiter Inlet in Florida, and from tundra, to old growth forests, to desert landscapes. These lands consist of many attributes; habitat for thousands of species of plants and animals, clean water, cultural resources, scenic beauty, solitude, and special places. They also provide the opportunity to 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, timber, and wild horses and burros. The economic value of these lands to the American people is immense; according to the *Department of the Interior Economic Contribution* report of July 2014, these lands generate combined revenues in excess of \$107 billion and over 446,000 jobs. These lands are important economically to the United States as a whole; they 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. However, these uses and values can only be achieved when there is some balance in the programs 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. The PLF believes the BLM budget proposal strives to provide a balance across most areas that will help it meet national priorities. We support the requests for the "all of the above" approach to provide vital energy needs from traditional energy sources and renewable

energy sources. Environmentally sound development of the Nation's energy resources and the infrastructure to deliver the energy can contribute significantly to the country's energy independence.

We also support the BLM's request for Congress to charter a national BLM Foundation, as it has for other land and resource management agencies. Such a Foundation would partner the BLM with the public to bring in key resources and partnerships to assist the BLM in the management of the NSPL.

The BLM proposes a \$5 million increase to fund BLM's part in the "Engaging the Next Generation" program. The PLF supports efforts to get youth involved in the outdoors and to gain an appreciation for the resources the nation offers. Many of the members of PLF gained an appreciation for land management either from working on ranches and farms or by involvement in activities, such as the ones proposed in this budget. We hope some of the participants in these programs may decide to go into careers in natural resource management and fill the jobs of the many employees nearing retirement. Working with established youth organizations to accomplish more on-the-ground project work would leverage the funds from this increase.

Over the past several years the PLF has stepped up to assist the BLM and other organizations to encourage youth to become involved with natural resource management. This past fall PLF teamed with the BLM and other organizations to hold the Second Student Congress. This biennial event brings together college-level resource management students from across the country to discuss and make recommendations on the future of land management. We have also established and funded scholarships for students to help them complete their education and enter fields in natural resource management.

We are also pleased that the proposal includes veterans. Recent experience has shown that the returning vets the agencies have hired come to the organization with leadership and team working skills that fit well with much of the work the BLM does; and recognizes the contribution these individuals have made to our country.

Over the past several years, the BLM, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and state wildlife management agencies across the West have worked together to develop and implement conservation plans for managing the sage-steppe ecosystem to conserve the Greater sage-grouse and other sage-steppe obligate species to prevent the need to list the sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act. The BLM has proposed a \$45 million dollar increase to implement projects that would reduce threats to the species and maintain and restore resiliency to the sage-steppe ecosystem. We support this request. The PLF is concerned that, should the FWS find the need to list the sage-grouse across a 12 state area, much of the agencies' time and dollars will go to meeting the process requirements of the Endangered Species Act and not into implementing restoration projects. This would have severe economic consequences to the rural communities in the affected states and to the nation's capabilities to produce energy resources and develop and maintain infrastructure; while at the same time doing little to improve the plight of the sage-grouse.

The PLF, while supportive of increases to restore the sage-steppe, is concerned that, at the same time, the BLM is proposing a \$6 million decrease to the Western Oregon O&C budget. Much of this decrease is in the “other forest resource” appropriation and will result in reduced capability to provide a balance in management between timber harvesting and mitigating impacts to other forest resources. This reduction could impact projects to restore the health and increase resiliency in forests and waterways used by listed ESA species of wildlife and fish. It will also reduce BLM’s capability to conduct resource surveys needed to prepare timber harvests in future years, impacting communities that are dependent on receipts from timber harvests. This results in shifting needed funds from one high priority area to another high priority area. We do not support this reduction and ask the Subcommittee to consider restoring it.

One of the biggest challenges that the BLM faces is finding a workable and acceptable solution to the Wild Horse and Burro problem. There is probably no BLM issue that receives more passionate input from the public and local governments than this program. The BLM has tried several approaches to resolve the problem of rapidly expanding horse populations yet continues to be stymied in finding and effectively implementing a solution that the public will accept. The budget proposes to start research on more effective fertility control methods and other actions suggested by the National Academy of Science study, but results from these actions are years off and will involve study and preparation of lengthy National Environmental Policy Act documents and, likely, result in litigation. Meanwhile the herds continue to grow, doubling every four to five years. There are currently approximately 46,000 horses on the range and the Appropriate Management Level is exceeded in 93% of the Herd Management Areas. Continuing to remove only 2000 head per year, as proposed in this budget, will only lead to geometrically increasing numbers on the land. The resulting soil, water, and vegetative damage and the attendant impact on wildlife and other land uses will continue and get worse. Many of these horses share the same habitat as the sage-grouse and other wildlife that BLM and other agencies are working so hard to protect.

In addition to the overabundance of horses on the range, BLM has even more, 50,000, in short- and long-term holding. The cost to feed and care for these animals for their relatively long life consumes a major part of the program budget. Something has to be done and we support the BLM’s “prize challenge” to find a solution, but, in our opinion, the solution is beyond what the BLM can do under current law; Congress will need to be involved and should do so soon.

A large part of managing the landscapes for resiliency involves managing for wildfire. Agencies in the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service have discussed for years the need to manage fuel loads and to implement more actions on the ground to build resiliency in forest and rangelands to reduce the risks and severity of catastrophic wildfire. The area needing treatment is huge. There has been improvement in conditions where projects have been implemented, however the scale and pace of treatments needs to expand and this can only be done with adequate budgets and a large landscape approach, which can only be accomplished with close coordination with other Federal, state and local agencies, and private property owners. The agencies also do a great job of suppressing nearly all of the wildland fire starts, catching around 98% of the fires with initial attack. However, the one or two percent of fires that escape initial attack become very expensive and over the past several years have quickly consumed the agencies suppression budget requiring them to “borrow” from other accounts. This transfer of

funds, often in the hundreds of millions of dollars, diminishes the agencies capabilities to implement planned fuel reduction and projects in other program areas. The PLF supports the Department's Wildland Fire proposal to change the way large fires are funded to provide more flexibility to the agencies in funding suppression and land treatment projects. Much of the Department's proposal compliments the proposed Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WFDA). The PLF supports the proposed changes in this budget and encourages the passage of the WFDA or similar legislation.

The PLF strongly supports the dedicated professional employees of the BLM and other agencies. The nature of the BLM mission is employee intense. Contractors can do some of the work, but much of it requires BLM employees that are professionally trained in their respective fields. These public employees enter these fields because of their commitment to the lands and resources. Over the years these committed public servants have done their best to implement the laws and policies of the Administration and Congress, yet they are often maligned and even physically confronted by those that disagree with those laws and policies. We ask that this subcommittee do what it can within its powers to support the dedicated employees in the resource management agencies.

Mr. Chairman, we do appreciate the hard choices that this Subcommittee has before it. Perhaps the creation of a BLM Foundation would help leverage scarce budget dollars. The BLM is the only major land management agency without a congressionally chartered foundation in place to support its efforts. A BLM Foundation could help bring additional resources to key initiatives like the National Conservation Lands, wild horses and burro management, restoration projects, and many other areas. We hope that our comments will be of help as you work through the FY 2016 budget process.

-END-