

**STATEMENT OF ROBERT V. ABBEY,
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BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES SENATE
ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE
CONCERNING
NEVADA WILDLIFE CONSERVATION INITIATIVES
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear here today to discuss wildlife conservation efforts in Nevada.

The State of Nevada encompasses a large portion of the Great Basin and Upper Colorado River Plateau of the United States. These lands were not divided into farms, primarily due to their lack of water. Towns remain widely separated. Curiously, Nevada is said to be the most urbanized State in our Nation. Those urban areas are concentrated, however, as is evident in Las Vegas and along the Eastern Sierra Front.

As a result, Nevada has a wealth of open land, largely in Federal ownership. These lands hold a wide and wonderful variety of wildlife and wildlife habitat. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is responsible for management of about 48 million acres of this land and the wildlife habitat on it.

Management of these lands is not an easy task. It requires coordination and partnership with local and State conservation groups and initiatives in order to be successful. The BLM in Nevada is fortunate to have many fine partners in this work, including the State of Nevada and its Division of Wildlife, as well as a number of private organizations, such as Nevada Bighorns Unlimited and the Nevada Wildlife Federation.

Recently, efforts to address some critical wildlife concerns in Nevada have been highly visible. These include projects to recover the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout, management guidelines for sage grouse and the sagebrush ecosystems that are their habitat, and the desert tortoise.

These species serve as a red flag for the overall health of our environment. The sage grouse is suffering from a decline in habitat, a concern to the BLM and many of the organizations and entities here today. Under the leadership of Terry Crawforth, Administrator for the Nevada Division of Wildlife, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, in cooperation with the BLM, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and others, have initiated a major effort to develop conservation plans for sage grouse in eight western States. In Nevada, Governor Guinn has taken a personal role in establishing a State sage grouse committee to develop strategies to conserve this game species. The BLM, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, as well as State, local and tribal representatives, have formed an interagency sagebrush habitat steering committee to coordinate habitat assessment, mapping, evaluation, and restoration for species at risk within sagebrush ecosystems in ten states, and to coordinate ecosystem and species conservation planning in order to provide consistency across agencies in addressing sagebrush ecosystem-related issues.

Through the Great Basin Restoration Initiative, the BLM in Nevada is cooperating with State and local agencies to stop the spread of invasive weeds and other vegetation and to restore appropriate plant communities on the rangelands.

After major wildfires in 1999 and 2000, the demand for sagebrush seeds and the seeds of other native plant species has increased considerably in the Great Basin. Through issuance of permits for harvesting of sagebrush and other native species seeds, the BLM is tracking harvest activities to ensure that sufficient seed is available for rehabilitation efforts that are currently underway in the areas hardest hit by the wildfires. The BLM is working with the Plant Conservation Alliance, private seed growers, State and

Federal nurseries and seed storage facilities to increase significantly the supply of native seeds available for rehabilitation and restoration work while reducing the cost of producing native seed in large quantities.

The BLM's Ely Field Office has taken a leadership role under the auspices of the Great Basin Restoration Initiative to restore and maintain the biological conditions of the Great Basin landscape in eastern Nevada through partnerships with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Nevada Division of Wildlife and dozens of other groups. Approximately 10 million acres of public land are in the project area, including 4 million acres of pinyon-juniper woodlands, 2 million acres of pinyon-juniper/sagebrush, 2.5 million acres of sagebrush, 1.5 million acres of valley bottoms and mixed forest conifer, 158 miles of stream riparian habitat, and 7,800 acres of meadows, springs, seeps and wetlands.

BLM field offices in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah have continued reintroduction and habitat improvement programs for bighorn sheep populations. Nevada contains some of the premier bighorn sheep habitats in the U.S. Approximately 2.5 million acres of BLM-managed lands in Nevada provide habitat for 3 subspecies of bighorn sheep: the California, Rocky Mountain and Desert bighorns. Cooperative efforts with the Nevada Division of Wildlife and partners such as Nevada Bighorns Unlimited have successfully restored bighorns on many historic habitats throughout the State. We estimate that there are an additional 1 million acres of suitable but unoccupied bighorn sheep habitat on BLM-managed land in the State.

Federal, State and private partnerships have substantially enhanced successful wildlife habitat management on BLM-managed land. The BLM works closely with a variety of groups to restore habitats for native wildlife species on BLM-managed lands. Over the past 10 years, the BLM, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Nevada Division of Wildlife, Trout Unlimited and local ranchers and sportsmen have made substantial investments to restore Lahontan cutthroat trout to 128 miles of the Marys River system, a premier trout stream in northeastern Nevada. The BLM's Challenge Cost Share program, established by Congress in 1985, has matched millions of dollars of private contributions with Federal appropriations through successful partnership efforts that have delivered conservation and restoration projects throughout the West.

The Outside Las Vegas Foundation, a new Federal/private partnership in Clark County, is restoring native plant communities in the Mojave Desert, including removal of the invasive tamarisk from riparian areas and replanting native willows and grasses to benefit desert tortoise, desert fish species and a wide range of native birds, mammals, and amphibians.

Following the disastrous, widespread wildland fires of 1999, the BLM extensively examined the effects of fire on habitat and ecosystem processes. We found that a fire cycle had developed, referred to in recent science reports as the "cheatgrass-wildfire cycle." This problem is acute in Nevada, where the cycle of fire disturbance has spurred the invasive cheat grass to alter range and wildlife habitats. Cheat grass has been on our landscape for many years, quietly spreading its water-stealing roots to ever increasing areas.

Cheatgrass sprouts quickly as winter moisture arrives on burned or disturbed lands. Its root mass quickly draws up all available moisture, denying it to sagebrush seed. Left unmanaged, sagebrush benchlands instead become fields of cheat grass. These fields dry out in the summer sun, and lay in wait for summer lightning.

There was a time when people thought that getting rid of sagebrush was a good thing. However, we now know that sagebrush is vital to the health of Great Basin wildlands. Sagebrush provides cover for sage grouse, mice and other rodents, smaller songbirds, ground squirrels—over 170 species which are inhabitants of the open land. It provides shelter from the summer sun and from raptors overhead. In winter, dry cheatgrass is buried under snow. Sagebrush rises above the snow, providing forage for deer, antelope, and sage grouse.

We look forward to working with our partners here in Nevada to address the cheat grass problem, along with other efforts at wildlife habitat and species restoration in a manner that balances the interests of

stakeholders and addresses wildlife and habitat needs. This effort is massive, across the millions of acres of the Great Basin. Change will require labor intensive effort and significant amounts of native seed. Each landscape will call for its own prescription. In some areas, we may need to plant sagebrush seedlings and sow native seed by hand. The entire spectrum of plant and landscape management must be brought into play if we are to begin a true Great Basin restoration program.

This concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions that members of the Committee may have.