

**STATEMENT OF CHUCK WASSINGER
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BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND FORESTS
"IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STEENS MOUNTAIN COOPERATIVE MANAGEMENT
AND PROTECTION ACT"
REDMOND, OREGON
MAY 29, 2002**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) experience in implementing the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act of 2000, Public Law 106-399. We appreciate the continuing interest you and the entire Oregon Congressional delegation have shown in the implementation of the Steens Act.

Steens Mountain offers exceptional natural and geologic diversity. The mountain provides visitors and residents with spectacular views of deep, glacial gorges, stunning colorful alpine wildflower meadows, high desert plant communities and the opportunity to see pronghorn antelope, elk, mule deer, wild horses, bighorn sheep, and raptors. The 52-mile Steens Mountain Backcountry Byway offers access to four campgrounds on the mountain and affords remarkable views of Kiger Gorge, the east rim, and wild horse overlooks.

None of this is news to the many people here today who love the Steens. Many of you have lived here for decades and generations and it is your wise stewardship and example that we look to in our management of the public lands within the Steens.

Secretary Norton talks about the "4Cs" -- consultation, cooperation, and communication all in the service of conservation. The Steens Act is a stunning example of her guiding principles put into action. Passage of the Act was a culmination of a cooperative effort at the local level. This was not a top-down Washington-driven proposal. Rather, it was the result of the hard work of the Oregon Congressional Delegation, Governor Kitzhaber, local land owners, users of the land, and local conservation organizations, to provide for long-term protection of the cultural, economic, ecological, and social health of this area.

The wide array of natural characteristics, community needs and desires, and competing interests, provides for many complex challenges and rewarding opportunities. I'd like to address some of the steps we have taken toward implementation, as well as some of the challenges that lie ahead of us.

Steens Mountain Advisory Council

The 12-member Steens Mountain Advisory Council was appointed by the Secretary of the Interior on August 14, 2001 -- pursuant to the Steens Act. Under the provisions of Subtitle D of the Steens Act, the Advisory Council is charged with advising the Secretary in the management of the Steens Area and in promoting cooperative management. In addition, the Secretary is charged with consulting with the advisory committee on the preparation and implementation of the management plan for the area. The Steens Mountain Advisory Council has met four times since their first meeting in October of last year. Four additional meetings are scheduled for the remainder of 2002. Issues including recreation, access, education, grazing, wilderness, and firefighting in the Steens have been addressed by the Council this year.

Steens Mountain Planning Efforts

The Steens Act requires that we develop a comprehensive management plan within four years of the passage of the Act to set long-term management direction for the area. In accordance with that planning process, in late February and early March of this year, the BLM held a series of meetings to enlist citizen help in identifying planning issues. The planning area consists of approximately 1.7 million acres of Federal land including the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area. We are

working in close collaboration with the Steens Mountain Advisory Council, the Southeast Oregon Resource Advisory Council, other Federal and State agencies, local governments, Tribes, and with the public, to identify future management direction for the entire planning area.

The information that we have gathered at the four scoping meetings, and through written comments, has been used to pinpoint issues and develop planning criteria and alternatives for the management of the area. The public comment period ended on April 15. After the comment period ended, we assessed comments, finalized planning criteria and worked on fine tuning draft alternatives. A document entitled "Summary of the Analysis of the Management Situation" was published this earlier spring to allow further public review of management opportunities. A draft management plan and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) are expected to be available for a 90-day public review period in the Spring of 2003. The proposed plan and final EIS are then anticipated by Winter 2003/2004.

Exchanges and Acquisitions

Title VI of the Steens Act mandates five land acquisition/exchanges. The Act authorized, and Congress subsequently appropriated, over \$5 million to complete these acquisitions. Those exchanges have been a major focus of BLM's efforts over the last year and the final exchange was completed in early April. In addition, two Land and Water Conservation Fund purchases, involving inholdings within the wilderness, have been completed since passage of the Act.

Twenty-five million dollars for additional land acquisitions and conservation easements is authorized through the Land and Water Conservation Fund by the Steens Act. As we receive appropriations for such acquisitions we will work cooperatively with the Steens Mountain Advisory Council, and local landowners to maximize the use of such monies. We recognize that acquisitions and conservation easements are an important part of successfully implementing the Steens Act, and to that end we will continue to work with you, Governor Kitzhaber, the entire Congressional delegation, and all interested stakeholders and publics.

Access

Access to wilderness inholdings and private inholdings is governed by Section 112(e) of the Steens Act and by the Wilderness Act of 1964. Both require reasonable and adequate access while minimizing impacts on designated wilderness. We are committed to addressing this issue. Both the Steens Act and the Wilderness Act provide some flexibility for allowing access to private inholdings. Both recognize the importance of providing the access and protecting wilderness values. We are presently investigating access options, and through an open dialogue with the public will provide for an analysis, disclosure of impacts, and discussion of the various options. Two access options currently under consideration are either a cooperative management agreement, or the more traditional permitting process.

The BLM intends to provide reasonable access to inholders in a manner that protects wilderness characteristics. The BLM Burns District is presently preparing the required Environmental Assessment (EA) to address inholding access needs in the Steens Wilderness in conformance with the Steens Act, the Wilderness Act, and BLM's Wilderness Management Regulations.

Livestock Grazing Permitees

The Steens Act requires that grazing within wilderness shall be administered in accordance with the Wilderness Act and the guidelines established by Congress in 1990. Those guidelines provide direction and examples of appropriate use of motorized vehicles and motorized equipment where practical alternatives do not exist. They also require that any occasional use of motorized equipment be authorized within the grazing permits for the area involved. The BLM intends to fully comply with this direction, and is preparing an EA to analyze the potential use of motorized vehicles and equipment, and practical alternatives that may exist for this purpose.

Recreational Use

For as long as people have settled in southeast Oregon, they have used the Steens Mountain area for

recreational purposes. Those uses are both individual and commercial. For many of the commercial activities the BLM is required to issue special recreation permits. The BLM Burns District staff have prepared EAs to analyze the impacts of current permitted recreational activities on public land within the Steens Mountain Area and, in particular, the Steens Mountain Wilderness Area. These EAs will identify impacts to resources and uses, while providing for streamlined administrative processes for permitting to be more responsive to our commercial recreation service partners. The National Environmental Policy Act process will analyze all options, current policy and the comments from the public and partners. BLM will work with the Steens Mountain Advisory Council before a final decision is made.

The BLM Burns District is also working with off-highway vehicle users to help them better understand their responsibilities under the Steens Act. Section 112 (b)(1) of the Act clearly prohibits the off-road use of motorized or mechanized vehicles on Federal lands, limiting their use to designated roads and trails as determined in the forthcoming management plan.

We are deeply aware of the importance of recreation issues to our local publics. We will continue to work closely with the Steens Mountain Advisory Council and all users, whether recreational or commercial, to find ways to best address their needs in the context of the Steens Act and other applicable laws and regulations.

Conclusion

As we continue to move forward on planning and implementation of the Steens Act, I give you my personal assurance that we will continue to involve all the interested parties who live in, recreate on, derive their livelihood from and love Steens Mountain. We have learned much from those who call the Steens home and we will continue to look to them for advice and guidance.