

**Statement of  
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Department of the Interior  
Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee  
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests  
S. 607, Cathedral Rock and Horse Heaven Wilderness Act  
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Thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior to testify on S. 607, the Cathedral Rock and Horse Heaven Wilderness Act. The Department generally supports S. 607, which would bring into Federal ownership certain lands along the John Day River in Oregon, and seeks to eventually designate those lands and adjacent public lands as wilderness. We appreciate the improvements made to this legislation since last Congress, and would like the opportunity to continue to work with Senator Wyden and the Committee on S. 607. We defer to the U.S. Department of Agriculture on those provisions of S. 607 involving the exchange of lands managed by the Forest Service.

**Background**

Congress recognized the rugged beauty of the John Day River in central Oregon by designating it as a wild and scenic river in 1988 (Public Law 100-557). Last year, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) built on the success of that designation when President Barack Obama signed into law Public Law 111-11, the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009. Title I, Subtitle J, of that Act provided for a series of land exchanges and the designation of the Spring Basin Wilderness in Wheeler County, along the east bank of the middle reaches of the John Day River.

Along the western bank of the John Day Wild and Scenic River, just to the south of Spring Basin Wilderness, are some equally outstanding lands proposed to become the Cathedral Rock Wilderness. The lands planned for designation range from the cliffs and canyons along the river heading westerly to steep rolling hills punctuated by rocky escarpments. Wagner Mountain is located in the center of the proposed wilderness and is the highest point in the area. The geology is dominated by ancient volcanics, composed of andesite flows, plugs, and domes. The entire area is covered in rhyolite ash-flows which produce dramatic red, white, and buff colored soils. Hunters and hikers alike enjoy the breathtaking scenery as well as the resident mule deer and elk populations, while rafters brave the John Day's rapids. Cultural sites showcase prehistoric fossils, stone tools, and rock art.

Four miles to the southwest of the Cathedral Rock region is the proposed Horse Heaven Wilderness. The name reflects Oregon's pioneer past when the flawless grasslands of the areas were a closely guarded secret. Today that secret is out and a wide range of recreationists enjoy the area's many opportunities. At more than 4,000 feet, Horse Heaven Mountain serves as a worthy centerpiece to a diverse landscape illustrating Oregon's high and low countries. Traveling south, rolling plains and steep terrain dominate the area; to the west, Muddy Creek is

the area's lone perennial stream. Prairie steppes throughout connect hearty shrubs and woodlands that demonstrate steadfast resolve to thrive in the rocky soil.

### **S. 607**

S. 607 provides for the exchange of lands between three private parties and the Federal government which would allow the consolidation of fragmented land patterns, the designation of two new potential wilderness areas, and a process for those areas becoming designated wilderness and components of the National Wilderness Preservation System. Should the land exchanges be completed, the additional land would greatly enhance the wilderness quality and manageability of the two areas proposed for wilderness.

Section 3 of the bill outlines a series of land exchanges with three private parties. Under section 206 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), the BLM has the authority to undertake land exchanges that are in the public interest. Exchanges allow the BLM to acquire environmentally-sensitive lands while transferring public lands into private ownership for local needs and the consolidation of scattered tracts. In principle, the BLM supports the land exchanges envisioned by S.607; however, we would like the opportunity to continue to work with the sponsor and the Committee to address concerns specifically in the areas of public access and the protection of cultural resources.

The lands proposed for exchange out of Federal ownership are largely scattered sections of public land intermingled with private land. The BLM in Oregon is continuing to assess these lands for their cultural resources and the need for possible mitigation. Many of these lands are significant to local tribes and we encourage continuing efforts to resolve the issues raised by the tribes.

The bill requires that the exchanges be consistent with FLPMA, including the requirement that the Secretary determined that the public interest would be served by completing the exchange (section 3(b)). We believe that this provides the BLM latitude to withdraw specific lands from the exchange if any serious impediments are discovered. Furthermore, the legislation provides that the Secretary may add such additional terms and condition as appropriate (section 3(c)(5)). We believe this would allow the BLM to require that all non-Federal parties are responsible for addressing any human safety concerns or the remediation of hazardous materials on the lands to be exchanged out of present ownership. Finally, the BLM supports the provisions of the bill requiring that all three exchanges be equal value exchanges, and that the appraisals be undertaken consistent with Uniform Appraisal Standards.

Section 4 of S. 607 proposes to designate two potential wilderness areas, the "Proposed Cathedral Rock Wilderness" and the "Proposed Horse Heaven Wilderness" on the lands that would be consolidated under the land exchanges envisioned by section 3 of the bill. When those land exchanges are completed, the Cathedral Rock Wilderness would include over 8,300 acres of public land and the Horse Heaven Wilderness 9,000 acres. The legislation provides a process in section 4(b) for converting the "proposed" wilderness areas into designated wilderness following adequate acquisitions of the now private lands. The BLM could manage these areas as wilderness following the exchanges. However, absent the largest exchange envisioned under S. 607, these areas would be impracticable for the BLM to manage as wilderness. That proposed

exchange with the local landowner, “Young Life,” involves the core of both the proposed Cathedral Rock and Horse Heaven wilderness areas.

The current land patterns of both the “Proposed Cathedral Rock Wilderness” and “Proposed Horse Heaven Wilderness” are highly fragmented. The BLM manages approximately 4,500 acres in seven non-contiguous parcels within the Cathedral Rock area and less than 3,000 acres in two separate parcels within Horse Heaven. The land exchanges are, of course, optional for the three private parties. If, in the end, the largest private land owner decided not to pursue the exchange, managing the areas as wilderness would not be practical given the fragmented nature of the BLM landholdings in these two areas. The BLM supports the provisions for interim management of the “proposed” areas and the methodology for final designation if sufficient land exchanges are consummated. We would like to continue to work with the sponsor and the Committee on issues concerning sufficient public access to the proposed wilderness areas.

Finally, section 3(g) of S. 607 would transfer the administrative jurisdiction of approximately 750 acres of BLM-managed lands to the Forest Service. The BLM supports this transfer of lands which will improve manageability.

### **Conclusion**

The proposed Cathedral Rock and Horse Heaven Wilderness areas could be outstanding additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System if the critical exchanges envisioned by the legislation are completed. We look forward to working with Senator Wyden and the Committee toward that end.