

**TESTIMONY CONCERNING THE INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE
UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE IN NEVADA FOR
THE HUMBOLDT-TOYABE NATIONAL FOREST**

FOR THE LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LAND

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Introduction. Good afternoon, Chairwoman Carleton, and committee members. My name is Jeanne Higgins, and I am the Forest Supervisor of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, your largest National Forest in Nevada, and the largest National Forest in the lower 48 states. Thank you for providing this speaking opportunity.

Many of you are very familiar with the United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, and the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. Today I will discuss issues that I feel are important for you to be aware of as you represent the citizens of Nevada who may be affected directly or indirectly by what occurs on the Humboldt Toiyabe National Forest.

Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Overview. Located in Nevada and a small portion of the Eastern Sierra of California, the Forest's spectacular 6.3 million acres vary from hardy desert landscapes to snow-capped mountains with lush alpine meadows and timbered canyons. The Humboldt-Toiyabe's 10 Ranger Districts are scattered across 5.3 million acres in Nevada, which also includes the Spring Mountains National

Recreation Area. Our dedicated workforce includes over 350 permanent and permanent-seasonal employees, and 160 part-time or summer positions that are mostly in fire management.

Forest offices in northwest-west Nevada are located in Carson City and Sparks (Supervisor's Office). Our only California office is located in Bridgeport, and is often described as "the gateway to Yosemite." While both the Carson and Bridgeport Districts have a majority of their managed lands within Nevada, they also include approximately one million acres in eastern California.

Topics: Today I will focus my testimony on four topics: Geothermal Energy and development of this resource on the National Forests in Nevada, Wild Horse and Burros, Wheeled Motorized Vehicle Use of the National Forest, also known as Travel Management and Fire Risk Management. I have also included briefing papers on the topics of Secure Rural Schools and community Self Determination Act of 2000 and how it's implementation relates to the Counties in Nevada, the proposed National Forest Planning Rule, the Roadless rule, and Ecosystem Restoration and Fuels Reduction in your briefing packet s but will not discuss unless you have questions. Also included is a list of 2012 Forest Fast Facts.

Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Resources

Geothermal Energy. In order to comply with Section 222(d) of the Energy Policy Act of 2005 and timely completion of actions necessary to process lease applications, the

Forest Service developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the USDI Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and USDA Forest Service in April 2006. This MOU establishes that the Forest Service will take the lead for completing pre-lease NEPA documents and is responsible for providing the official Forest Service consent or non-consent to leasing on National Forest System lands. The Forest Service and BLM will also identify, through the analysis, reasonable and justifiable stipulations needed to protect or minimize impacts on specific resources or land uses. With the increasing demand for alternative energy sources in response to decreasing reliance on fossil fuels, there has been high interest in geothermal leasing in Nevada. The Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest is positioned to assist with the renewable energy need due to its high geothermal potential that exists on National Forest System Lands through the central part of the State.

The BLM has authority to oversee geothermal leasing and operations on National Forest System (NFS) lands. In order for the Forest Service to respond to requests received covering 10 years of proposals for geothermal leasing, we are currently completing a Geothermal Leasing Environmental Analysis. The Geothermal Leasing on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) is currently available for a 45-day public comment period. The comment period began on Dec. 30, 2011, and ends on Monday February 15, 2012.

The Proposal being considered by the Forest Service would be to consent to lease up to 615,000 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands for geothermal leasing. The

lands proposed for availability encompass most of the Nevada portion of the Bridgeport Ranger District (approximately 602,115 acres) located in Douglas, Lyon and Mineral Counties, one area on the Austin Ranger District (3,961 acres) located in Lander County, one area on the Tonopah District (166 acres) located in Nye County, and one area on the Ely Ranger District (3,538 acres) located in White Pine County.

Key resource issues analyzed in the DEIS are leasable acres within inventoried roadless areas, protection of cultural resources and areas of tribal importance and portions of the project area that contain key habitat for sage grouse. Mitigations are proposed to protect these resources.

The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Record of Decision should be released in May of 2012. This decision will identify land parcels, if any, the agency will consent to lease, along with required stipulations for protection of the environment.

Wild horse and Burro Program.

Nationally, the Forest Service is responsible for approximately 10 percent, or 53 of the established Wild horse and Burro Territories, with the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest managing 26 or 49 percent of these territories. To date there are 18 active Wild Horse & Burro Territories out of the total 26 territories on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have established a national interagency agreement in which funds are transferred to the BLM to conduct gathers on National Forests. Included in the agreement is a multi-year

schedule identifying which wild horse territories will be gathered each year. In Nevada, the BLM is currently pursuing around 11 wild horse and burro gathers this year.

The numbers of wild horse and burros in Nevada are increasing. To effectively manage these animals according to the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, the Forest coordinates with the BLM to remove “excess” animals. Gathers are only accomplished on those territories that have established appropriate management levels (AMLs) and wild horse and burro grazing capacities. To date, there are 12 territories that have approved AMLs and 14 territories that have yet to have AMLs established.

As a priority, the Forest Service will complete NEPA analysis to set the appropriate management levels (AMLs) within ten wild horse and burro territories in 2012. This includes three territories within the Toquima range and seven territories within the Monitor and Hot Creeks ranges. The Forest Service anticipates establishment of AMLs for the remaining WB wild horse and burro territories on the Humboldt-Toiyabe NF within the next five years. We will also continue to census the number of animals to determine if gathers are needed.

Travel Management. Over the last several years, the Forest Service has been establishing a designated route system of roads and trails for public wheeled motorized use. This is in response to the Travel Management Rule (36 CFR part 212,

subpart B). On the Humboldt Toiyabe NF, there are over 5,700 miles of system roads and motorized trails and approximately 8,000 miles of additional routes created by Forest users (never managed as part of the Forest Road System).

Each Ranger District has undertaken a district-wide travel management assessment and proposed a series of roads and trails for public use (including both system and user created routes). This may not include all roads needed for administration of the National Forest but should be an adequate network to allow for public access to the places people enjoy using. The product of this effort is a motor vehicle use map for the public to utilize to know where they can drive various classes of wheeled motorized vehicles.

Forest Service decisions support recreation in rural Nevada and include a concerted effort to maintain motorized access to dispersed campsites and dispersed recreation opportunities. In addition, ranchers, outfitters and guides, mineral exploration firms, and others will have the same level of access they currently have to the National Forest System lands. These decisions designate a forest transportation system that the agency can manage for generations to come which also ensures the sustainability of the land.

The Forest Service has currently completed an initial designation and production of Motor Vehicle Use Maps for the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area, and the Carson, Santa Rosa, Ely, Austin, Tonopah, and Bridgeport Ranger Districts. The Forest Service has also completed analysis on the Ruby Mountains, Jarbidge, and Mountain City Ranger Districts and a decision on an initial designated route system is pending.

In addition, the Forest Service is also in the process of reviewing the motor vehicle use maps published over the last six years. Each Ranger District with a published map will be seeking public input on the forest transportation system depicted on the motor vehicle use maps (MVUMs). The Rangers and their staff will then determine what types of changes to make and the appropriate level of environmental analysis to update the maps.

Forest Service employees are also actively signing roads with road numbers to better enable Forest Users to orient themselves to the maps.. Signs have been installed on the Carson Ranger District, the Santa Rosa Ranger District, Spring Mountains NRA, and the Ely Ranger District. Installation of signs on the Austin, Tonopah, Ruby Mountains, Jarbidge, and Mountain City Ranger Districts will begin during the 2012 field season.

Education is a key component to the success of Travel Management. The Forest Service has utilized radio spots, billboards, development of an OHV website, and information flyers to inform the public on travel management. The forest Law Enforcement Officers continue to use education and warnings when appropriate.

Fire Risk Management. In 2009 a new “Guidance for Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy” was issued by the Departments of Agriculture and Interior. Two key principles of the guidance are 1) Firefighter and Public Safety as the

first priority on every fire, and 2) Sound Risk Management is a foundation for all fire management activities.

Risk Management is a part of the planning process for the management of wildland fires along with cost management and resource management within the State of Nevada.

Risks and uncertainties relating to fire management activities are analyzed, and communicated as they relate to the cost of either doing or not doing an action such as fireline construction or aerial firefighting. Some control objectives may not be worth the risk of implementation when weighed against the risk to the safety of firefighters and the values at risk.

The Humboldt-Toiyabe is engaging cooperators, such as the Nevada Division of Forestry, in pre-season risk assessment workshops as well as during incidents to assess values at risk and the risk weighed against the gain of fire management actions before carrying out those actions. We will discuss items such as not suppressing all of our fires with constructed fire line as we have in the past. The risk of firefighting will be weighed against the protection of the values at risk, such as rangeland management objectives, the value of the timber under fire, or the risk to a community depending on fire behavior. This means, that fires being suppressed may have portions left uncontrolled if the risk of controlling the fire is greater than the value of the resource burning. For example, we may contain a large fire on the flank heading toward a community and not engage a fire midslope on another area where the fire is not burning through a sensitive area. In this midslope fire, we may wait for it to move to a more

favorable location for successful suppression operations. These fires may appear similar to fires being managed for a resource benefits but in reality are still fire suppression incidents being managed at a lower risk levels. Examples from Idaho include the 2011 Salt Fire with fire containment on the side toward Salmon Idaho and no fire containment on the other three sides of the fire. Planning efforts and preparation for suppression still continue should the fire move toward other high value areas. This is only a part of our efforts to eliminate firefighter fatalities from the current reality of several firefighter deaths nationally each season.

Conclusion. Thank you, Chairwoman Carleton, and committee members, for this opportunity to provide you with more information about the Humboldt-Toiyabe NF. I would also like you to hear from Genny Wilson, Carson City District Ranger to give you an up-to-date briefing on projects and programs associated with her district, located here in Carson City. You will also note that I provided testimony from Mike Crawley, Bridgeport District Ranger, who was unable to be here today. He did want to ensure that you had an up-to-date briefing on projects and programs associated with his district.

I also invite committee members to visit the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest and would be glad to put together a field trip for the committee to personally see any project that may interest you.

-END OF TESTIMONY-