

**TESTIMONY CONCERNING FOREST SERVICE ACTIVITIES
ON THE SPRING MOUNTAINS NATIONAL RECREATION AREA OF
THE HUMBOLDT-TOIYABE NATIONAL FOREST**

**FOR THE LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS
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Introduction. Good morning, Chairman Rhoads, and subcommittee members. My name is Genny Wilson, and I am the Acting District Ranger for the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area, which I will abbreviate as the "NRA" throughout my presentation. Thank you for providing this speaking opportunity today.

Today I will brief you on the following Forest Service activities on the NRA:

- Status of the Las Vegas Ski and Snowboard Resort, Travel Management Plan implementation, the Mt. Charleston Blue Butterfly, the 2007 fire season, the Fuels Reduction Program/Biomass Utilization, and the Wild Horse and Burro gathers in 2007.

I will begin this presentation by discussing the Las Vegas Ski and Snowboard Resort.

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Las Vegas Ski and Snowboard Resort. This topic has three important components to address; the Resort's Master Plan development, the biological sensitivity of the area, and the first year of a shuttle bus system. I'll begin with the Resort's Master Development Plan.

Resort Master Development Plan: Lee Canyon Ski Lift Inc. purchased the resort in 2003 and acquired the special use permit with the NRA. The resort is located entirely on the National Forest, and is operated through a special use permit with the Forest Service. Since acquisition of the resort by the new owners, they have focused on upgrading the facility for public safety, including establishment of a permanent avalanche control program.

In September, the resort submitted a Draft Master Development Plan to the Forest Service. This draft plan represents the ski area's first attempts at crafting a formal development plan that identifies their management over the next 10 years. The draft plan focuses on replacing base facilities and existing ski lifts with modern buildings and equipment. Most of the facilities are from the original resort, which was built in the 1960s.

The final Master Development Plan will likely be accepted by the Forest Service this winter. We would then begin to analyze proposed activities through the National Environmental Policy Act ("NEPA") process to determine compatibility

with our general management plan. This leads to the next topic related to the ski area but one which also affects all of our recreation development opportunities on the NRA.

Biological Sensitivity. As you may know, the NRA was originally designated a National Recreation Area, in large part due to the unique ecosystem found in the Spring Mountains. The Spring Mountains has at least 23 endemic species that are found no where else in the world. The Spring Mountain Range is recognized by the Nature Conservancy as one of the most diverse landscapes in North America. As public pressure increases and we learn more and more about the biological resources found in the NRA we are discovering how fragile this ecosystem is.

The ski area falls within one of the areas identified in our General Management Plan as a "biological hotspot". The ski area has a concentration of unique plant and animal species. Therefore, whenever we propose to improve or increase ski area facilities, we must look at the environmental consequences of these actions. Thus the ski resort managers and the NRA staff have been working through an environmental consultant to address these issues to provide for ski area improvements and protection of sensitive species. I will now address the final topic related to the ski area, the new shuttle system.

Shuttle System. The U.S. Forest Service and Las Vegas Ski and Snowboard Resort are entering into a one-year shuttle system pilot partnership to operate from a northwest Las Vegas “Park and Ride” facility to the resort during peak visitation periods. Approximately 60,000 people visit the resort annually, 1,300 visit the resort daily during peak season, and 700 vehicles are parked at the resort daily during peak visitation. Paved parking capacity is 355 spaces.

An Alternative Transportation in Parks and Public Lands program grant for \$168,300 was awarded for the 2007 program. This grant will pay for the shuttle service rental, and the resort will pay all other operating expenses. The best news is that if the program is successful, we can reapply for funding in subsequent years.

The shuttle partnership would:

- Address both the Forest Service and resort’s safety concerns when the ski resort and adjacent snow play areas become congested with vehicles and visitors.
- Greatly decrease emergency vehicle response time delays due to congestion.

- Take the pressure off of the Forest Service and the resort's limited opportunities to expand parking capacity due to environmental constraints. And, finally, the shuttle service would
- Provide alternative transportation for visitors without vehicles or those choosing not to drive due to road conditions.

I will now move on to our next topic: Travel Management Implementation

Travel Management Implementation. The National Travel Management Rule was published in the *Federal Register* in November 2005 and requires each Forest Service Ranger District, such as the NRA, to designate those roads, trails, and areas that are open to motor vehicle use. Once designation is complete, the Rule prohibits motor vehicle use off the designated route system. The rule limits the use of cars, trucks, SUVs, ATVs OHVs, and motorcycles to *designated* roads, trails, and areas. The NRA is the first unit in the National Forest System to implement the Travel Management Rule.

On September 30, 2007, the NRA posted the Motorized Vehicle Use Map for the area on the internet. This map displays all designated routes available to motorized vehicle traffic on the NRA. The map can be viewed on the web at www.fs.fed.us/r4/htnf/recreation/mvum/mvum.shtml, at the Interagency Office in Las Vegas, at the Forest Service Visitors Center in Kyle Canyon, and at the

Supervisor's Office in Sparks, Nevada. We have also distributed the map to some of the area OHV dealerships. We are currently signing all open routes. After the "open" signs have been posted, we will then sign the remaining roads and trails that are not open to motorized traffic.

We plan to work with local OHV groups to assist as volunteers with posting the open routes and implementation of the rule.

I will now move on to the next topic, the Mt. Charleston Blue Butterfly.

Mt. Charleston Blue Butterfly. The NRA's "Mt. Charleston Blue Butterfly" is classified as a Forest Service Sensitive Species and was petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act in 2005. The species was first documented on the NRA in the 1920s. At that time, it was thought to have a widespread distribution, and we now know it only resides on the NRA.

Prior to European settlement, this butterfly's habitat occurred in mountain meadows, avalanche chutes, and post-burn areas. Over time, with fire suppression, water diversion, ski area construction, and other human-created openings in the form of residences, campsites, timber cutting, meadow construction, etc., distribution of the species has dwindled.

Field surveys document a steady decline of the blue butterfly and withdrawal from many of the historic sites. Recent surveys have not detected the butterfly at many of the formerly known locations. Historically, this butterfly has consistently been found at the Lee Canyon Ski Area. The only known sighting of the butterfly in 2006 was at the Las Vegas Ski and Snowboard Resort.

The primary threats to this species are the development and maintenance of recreational facilities and the inadvertent damage to sites from Forest visitors. Many construction and repair projects considered vital to the upkeep and growth of the Las Vegas Ski and Snowboard Resort have been delayed pending further study. Depending on the timing of fuels reduction treatments, the butterfly can be immediately affected through direct mortality or loss of food or cover.

In 2007, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service completed its 90-day finding status review and determined substantial scientific information exists to warrant a more in-depth examination. Currently, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is performing an in-depth review known as a 12-month finding, which includes a request for public input and should be completed in May 2008.

Meanwhile, the Forest Service continues its monitoring at known sites and is working to develop new survey protocols. Only four Mt Charleston Blue Butterflies were documented during field surveys this year.

A Round 8 Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act funded proposal will study the life history of the Mt. Charleston Blue Butterfly. If the Mt. Charleston Blue Butterfly is federally listed under the Endangered Species Act, opportunities to increase ski facilities, campgrounds, trails and other recreational facilities could be severely limited. Further developments will require careful planning in consultation with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to ensure protection and recovery of the species. I will now move on to last season's fire statistics from January through October.

FY 2007 Fire Season. The Southern Nevada federal agencies were fortunate to experience a below-average fire season in 2007. Conditions remained extreme into October, and Southern Nevada remains ready for wildland fire response.

Fire Report Statistics from January to August 6, 2007:

BLM: **34 fires** 27 human-caused, 442 acres
 12 lightning-caused, 106 acres **Total acres: 548**

USFS: **11 fires** 8 human-caused, 145 acres
 5 lightning-caused, 18 acres **Total acres: 163**

NPS: **24 fires** 18 human-caused, 5 acres
 7 lightning-caused, 374 acres **Total acres: 379**

USFWS: **3 fires** 2 human-caused, 38 acres
 1 lightning-caused, 0 acres **Total acres: 38**

Grand Total: 1,118 acres

Southern Nevada federal agencies are staffed with base budget funding to support:

- 10 wildland fire engines (4 BLM, 2 NPS and 4 Forest Service located at: Mountain Springs, Indian Springs, Kyle and Lee Canyons)
- 3 Forest Service Prevention Patrol Units
- 1 Interagency Fire Dispatch Center
- 1 Interagency Helitack Crew

Fire danger in Southern Nevada was at record levels most of the summer, but the lightning storms produced few fires.

All Southern Nevada resources, including engines, helicopter, and personnel spent time helping other units with fires in Northern Nevada, Idaho, and most recently in Southern California. We continue to have excellent working relations with BLM, NPS, USFWS, NDF, and Clark County. Additional fire restrictions were coordinated among all agencies, and fire resources were shared among all agencies as needed. Now I will talk about the highlights of our Fuels Reduction Program.

Fuels Reduction Program. The NRA's Wildland-Urban Interface, or "where the homes meet the Forest," Fuels Reduction project was initiated in 2006. The purpose of the project is to provide long-term wildland fire protection to surrounding communities by constructing and maintaining fuel breaks throughout the wildland-urban interface in the NRA. The interface areas within the NRA were identified as those areas immediately adjacent to communities and access routes and at extreme-to-high risk for wildland fire in the Clark County Fire Risk Assessment Report.

The Nevada Fire Safe Council has had an active partnership in fuels reduction with homeowners on the private lands within the NRA and has been eagerly supporting the Forest Service project. The wildland-urban interface fuels reduction treatments will be accomplished by thinning and removing vegetation within 300-to-600 feet adjacent to private lands and developments, as well as evacuation routes.

Cooperators, such as the Nevada Fire Safe Council and the Nevada Division of Forestry, as well as community member involvement, have been outstanding and the NRA expects no objections to this project, and I will personally sign this decision next week. To create these fuel breaks as soon as possible, we've hired a specialized Forest Service team to layout, design, and prepare contracts.

Fuel breaks are now being flagged around the communities of Mountain Springs and Williams Ranch in Trout Canyon. Residents and visitors in these areas can expect to see equipment and activity in this area beginning in January when hand crews will begin work at the lower elevations. Onsite fuel break lay-out will begin later in Lee Canyon and Kyle Canyon. Large scale contracts will be issued beginning this spring. The project includes a variety of removal methods that will be contracted using cable yarders, helicopter, ground based masticators and skidders. Increased firewood will become available for the public as the project removes trees and other vegetation

Some boundary delineation issues, as well as encroachment/trespass issues may possibly delay full project implementation in some specific locations. The NRA is also working in collaboration with the BLM, NDF, Clark and Nye Counties, the Nevada Fire Safe Council and others, on a 10-year fuels plan for the entire Spring Mountains range. This plan will analyze, identify, and prioritize opportunities for fuel reductions work across the entire mountain range outside the wildland-urban interface. A corollary project is currently in the works to perform fine scale Fire Regime Condition Class mapping of the Spring Mountains range which will complement the 10-year plan. "Fire Regime Condition Class" is the measure we use to compare current fuels from vegetation with that of historic conditions i.e. what the natural composition of vegetation versus the current conditions which have been heavily influenced by humans. We will then make

recommendations of how to treat these areas across the landscape that are not within a “natural fuels condition”.

The Forest Service has also been a primary lead in the Southern Nevada Biomass Working Group. In partnership with Nevada Division of Forestry, Nevada Fire Safe Council, Clark County, University of Nevada Las Vegas and BLM we are identifying opportunities to manage “biomass” in Clark County. Initial data collected indicates that there is sufficient wood waste being produced in the area from construction wood waste, landscaping, and other sources which would include biomass from Forest Service and other public lands to create a biomass processing plant. We are currently working with UNLV to hire a full time person to develop this opportunity.

My final topic is the 2007 Wild Horse and Burro gather:

2007 Wild Horse and Burro Gather. In 2006 and 2007 a Wild Horse and Burro gather was designed and implemented by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), in coordination with the Forest Service, to manage wild horse and burro populations inhabiting the Spring Mountain Wild Horse and Burro Territory/Herd Management Area.

Prior to the enactment of the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971, wild horses and burros were not federally protected species. Herd numbers were

controlled by ranchers and by mustangers who hunted the horses or gathered them for sale.

Wild horses and burros have an average recruitment rate of 18% per year, so their populations double about every 5 years. The majority of herds need to be controlled by the managing agencies in order to protect the land from overgrazing and to protect the horses from eventual starvation due to overgrazing.

Across the Spring Mountains Herd Management Complex there were a total of 865 animals gathered.

The best means for caring for excess wild horses and burros is to find good homes for them with the American public. For this, the national Adopt-A-Horse or Burro Program was created.

Some excess animals are found to be unadoptable and are sent to federally funded sanctuaries or long term holding facilities where they live out their natural lives on the prairie.

The contractors released a total of 75 horses and 3 burros back into the Spring Mountains Herd Management Area. Mares that were returned to the range were given a dose of PZP fertility control that lasts one year.

The damaged fences across the lower portion of Lee Canyon were repaired and a fence will be built across Mc Farland Canyon to help prevent access and the return of wild horses into Upper Lee Canyon.

The BLM and Forest Service are currently putting a plan in place in case the horses find their way back into Lee Canyon. The appropriate management levels have been met and monitoring of the range will continue in future years to help determine if appropriate management levels need to be adjusted.

Thank you Chairman Rhoads, and subcommittee members for this opportunity to address management activities on the Spring Mountains NRA. I will now address any questions you may have concerning the NRA.

-END OF TESTIMONY-