

Final Remarks for Nora Rasure

Nevada Legislative Committee on Public Lands

Elko, Nevada – July 28, 2016

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. I'm Nora Rasure, Regional Forester for the Intermountain Region of the Forest Service. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about the work of the Forest Service here in Nevada and throughout the Region. The last time I spoke with some of you was in the spring of 2015 in Carson City, Nevada. Being able to participate in today's meeting here in Elko, Nevada, has provided me the additional benefit of being able to visit with local employees, elected officials, and a range permittee while I am in the area.

The Intermountain Region includes 12 National Forests located in Nevada, Utah, and portions of Idaho, Wyoming, California and Colorado. To manage this expansive region, I depend on Forest Supervisors, such as Bill Dunkelberger on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest to work closely with our stakeholders to effectively and wisely manage National Forest System lands. In turn, Bill trusts his district rangers to manage at the local level. So while you may not see me often, please know that I have the utmost confidence in Bill and his staff. Bill and I speak frequently, so that I can better understand and address local concerns.

Today, I would like to highlight work in Nevada and region-wide that is being done to sustain our nation's forests and grasslands, and deliver benefits to the public. I'll start by describing how we're meeting two important regional and national goals. Then I'd like to talk further about two topics I suspect will be of interest to you: greater sage grouse conservation, and wildfire prevention and suppression.

A major goal of the Forest Service both regionally and nationally is to sustain our forests and grasslands.

In the Intermountain Region, we are achieving this goal by implementing the Governors' Farm Bill Insect and Disease projects and restoring sage grouse habitat. As an example of this restoration, the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest reduced fuels on over 16,000 acres last fiscal year. Of that, 9,400 acres benefited bi-state and greater sage grouse habitat. Treatments also target the 13 insect and disease treatment areas nominated by Governor Sandoval under the Farm Bill authority. We're on track to treat 14,000 acres this fiscal year.

We continue to look for ways to effectively accomplish this important work. In Nevada, a Forest Service agreement with the Nevada Division of Forestry provides an opportunity for the State to complete restoration work on National Forest System lands. For instance, as District Ranger John Baldwin will describe, NDF crews have worked to complete roadside brush removal and chipping in Lamoille Canyon.

Our agencies are discussing how we can use another tool provided through the Farm Bill, called the Good Neighbor Authority which would allow us to expand this mutually beneficial work. Due to problems with access to timber infrastructure, the focus of our work is likely to be fuels reduction, with some possibility for biomass and commercial fuelwood coming off these projects. This authority also could be used for watershed restoration.

We're also seeking to expand discussions and actions to support ongoing and emerging National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy efforts in Nevada, Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming. Here in Nevada, we worked with and provided financial support to the Nevada Division of Forestry to convene a Cohesive Strategy Summit.

This two-day event in Reno, which I was able to attend, brought stakeholders together to develop a strategic plan to implement the three goals of the strategy: resilient landscapes, fire-adapted communities, and safe and effective wildland fire response. Since the summit in the fall of 2015, the newly formed Cohesive Strategy Advisory Group has worked to identify objectives and action items under each of these goals.

A second regional and national goal that I believe will resonate with you is to deliver benefits to the public.

One way we're achieving this goal is by continuing to integrate our State & Private Forestry branch with National Forest System programs to strengthen effectiveness of program delivery across land management boundaries and build connections with neighboring communities.

State and Private Forestry provided more than \$2.3 million to the State of Nevada in 2015. This funding supports forest health management and forest stewardship, landscape scale restoration, state fire assistance grants, urban and community forestry and volunteer fire assistance.

These programs promote the health and productivity of Nevada's forests, rangelands and rural economies. We emphasize conservation practices, water resource protection, forest product utilization, wildfire hazard reduction, wildlife habitat enhancement and support of rural economies. The funding also contributes to firefighter safety. The Volunteer Fire Assistance grant allowed NDF to provide 43 of the 150 Volunteer Fire Departments with 283 up-to-date handheld and mobile radios and 70 new generation fire shelters.

Around the region, we're also focusing on strengthening connections with communities, particularly under-served communities, urban areas and youth. This Saturday, the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area will host a Learning Lab for the Greater Las Vegas Latino community. Through interactive activities, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of, and relationship with, the Latino communities who live near, rely upon, and recreate on the Forest. A stronger connection will allow the Forest Service to integrate community perspectives into its decision-making and communication efforts.

In another recent example, the Forest Service recently partnered with the Nevada Indian Commission and other agencies to host the Traditional Ecological Knowledge Summit. The focus of the summit was to discuss and identify how best to incorporate Traditional Ecological Knowledge into the adaptive management of sagebrush and pinyon juniper ecosystems. Approximately two hundred people attended, including tribal members, tribal leaders and land management professionals and managers from throughout Nevada and Eastern California.

Next I'd like to turn to two current issues in which the State of Nevada and the Forest Service share a strong interest: greater sage grouse conservation and wildfire prevention and suppression.

The Forest Service is proceeding with implementation of the greater sage grouse record of decision using a measured, phased-in approach. Regional teams have worked to develop guides that will help Forest Service personnel implement the direction in the Record of Decision. These guides are living documents – we fully expect them to change and evolve as we implement policy on the ground. The guides don't provide new policy. They are broad for the sake of consistency and allow for flexibility and decision-making at the local level.

I want to acknowledge that Nevada, and the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, face some heavy lifting in terms of a contribution to our sage grouse conservation goals. The Humboldt-Toiyabe has 73 percent of the regional workload for greater sage grouse habitat improvement, with a ten-year objective of 20,200 acres of conifer removal and 43,000 acres of sagebrush and forb restoration.

Region-wide, we have funded 5,200 acres for invasive plant control, identified more than 1 million acres of preliminary nesting and breeding habitat and completed 70,400 acres of conifer removal and sagebrush and forb restoration.

As you know, the Bureau of Land Management has proposed the withdrawal of nearly 2.8 million acres in Nevada from mineral activities. Just over 568,000 of these are National Forest System Lands. As called for in the Record of Decision, the Forest Service requested that BLM propose withdrawal of these acres to protect the Sagebrush Focal Areas, which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined are “strongholds” for the greater sage grouse.

I would like to recognize Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval for working with the Nevada Division of Minerals and the Nevada Department of Wildlife to develop an alternative that seeks to protect the best sage grouse habitat and areas of high minerals potential. Analysis of this alternative in the Environmental Impact Statement will allow for an informed decision that considers both species conservation and economic opportunity.

Nevada has also been a leader in developing a compensatory mitigation system for sage grouse habitat. In April of this year, the Forest Service signed a Memorandum of Understanding that allows us to use the Conservation Credit System for compensatory mitigation, when project impacts to sage grouse habitat can’t be avoided or minimized. The Forest Service recognizes Nevada’s Sagebrush Ecosystem Technical Team as a cooperating agency, sharing scoping and project information. The Conservation Credit System is now serving as a model for other states as they develop mitigation plans.

I also want to bring to your attention the efforts underway with the State of Nevada, the Forest Service and the BLM to determine how our agencies can collaborate as we move forward with implementation of the greater sage grouse Record of Decisions. In late June, the Governor’s Sagebrush Ecosystem Council voted to proceed with further development of a multi-level framework for collaboration. The success of the Bi-State Action Plan, which lays out activities to protect the bi-state sage grouse, provides an excellent example of how well such collaborative implementation can work.

I'd like to end my remarks about sage grouse conservation by directly addressing the question of whether grazing and greater sage grouse conservation can co-exist. In my view, the answer to this question is clearly laid out in the greater sage grouse record of decision, which does not call for end to grazing on national forest system lands.

Instead, the ROD directs us to manage grazing in a way that moves us toward desired habitat conditions, and we have a number of management tools at our disposal to do this. Where we're having difficulty achieving those desired conditions, it's essential that we coordinate with our permittees, BLM and other agencies to find a way forward.

In a separate but related topic, I would be remiss if I spoke to you in late July without talking about wildfire season. The Great Basin Coordination Center's predictive services branch is forecasting elevated fire potential in northern Nevada and southern Idaho in August, which may impact Greater Sage Grouse habitat.

The Intermountain Region remains vigilant along with our BLM partners in our preparation to meet the threats from wildfire. This includes working together to pre-position fire resources during periods of high fire danger.

I am pleased to share that the Intermountain Region has strong working relationships with our partners in the Cohesive Strategy, including States and Department of Interior bureaus. Combining our fire suppression assets with partners effectively doubles our capability to respond to wildland fire in the interior west.

In addition, the Region engaged all of our fire personnel and agency leadership in conversations this spring around improving the wildland fire system to one that more reliably protects people, communities and landscapes.

A half-million acres (about 780 square miles) of hazardous fuels reduction treatments have been completed on National Forest Systems lands in the Intermountain Region during the past three years. This treated area will provide protection and influence wildland fire behavior adjacent to communities and high value assets.

That concludes my prepared remarks. I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to talk with you today and visit this beautiful part of your state. If you have any questions, I am happy to answer them, and will call on Forest Supervisor Bill Dunkelberger to assist as needed.

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