TESTIMONY ON RESOURCE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES
ON THE
SPRING MOUNTAINS NATIONAL RECREATION AREA
HUMBOLDT-TOIYABE NATIONAL FOREST
FOR THE
LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS
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INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Committee Members, for providing this opportunity to speak before you today. My Name is Steve Holdsambeck, and I am the District Ranger for the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.

Before I begin my presentation, I want you to know that I have served as the District Ranger for the past two years, and will soon be relocating to Ogden, Utah’s Regional Office as the Regional Fire Safety Program Manager. The Forest has not yet selected my replacement, but the Forest Supervisor will let you know when that personnel change has occurred.

Getting back to this morning presentation, I will first provide background information on the NRA, and next address some of the high priority issues facing the National Recreation Area. The final portion of my presentation will explain how we have strategically capitalized upon available Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act funding.

For brevity’s sake, I will refer to the National Recreation Area as the NRA throughout this presentation.
BACKGROUND

- The Spring Mountains National Recreation Area covers 316,000 acres in Clark and Nye counties in Southern Nevada, between Las Vegas and Pahrump. Most locals refer and think of the NRA as Mt. Charleston.

- The NRA is one of Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest’s ten Ranger Districts, and was congressionally designated in August, 1993, as a National Recreation Area.

- As you all well know, the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area is located adjacent to the nation’s top tourist destination and fastest-growing city.

- In stark contrast to the neon lights of Las Vegas and its staggering valley heat, the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area’s old spruce-fir and ponderosa pine forests offer a cool escape in the summer. The NRA also is home to Southern Nevada’s only ski area atop Mt. Charleston.

- The Spring Mountains are what ecologists call a Sky Island. This particular range has the greatest elevational relief (between the desert floor and the mountain top) and greatest isolation (from other mountains) of any sky island in the southwest. For endemics species such as the Mt. Charleston Blue Butterfly or the Palmer's Chipmunk the Spring Mountains is their Noah’s Ark.

- The NRA is also home to 216 springs, 17 species found nowhere else in world, and Nevada’s Great Basin bristlecone pine, Rocky Mountain white fir, and Rocky Mountain ponderosa pine state tree champions.
Lastly important to note the NRA’s cultural significance. For the Southern Paiutes, Mount Charleston is the source of “Puha,” the Paiute word that roughly translates in English as “the energy that flows through all life.” It is the most sacred mountain for this tribe that expands through Utah, Nevada, and Arizona.

CHALLENGES FACING THE NRA

Our greatest challenge to the National Recreation Area is effectively managing the impacts of over a million visitors annually. This challenge parallels the Chief of the Forest Service’s Four Threats to National Forests and Grasslands. These are the very same four threats that you have been hearing about at other Public Lands Committee meetings this year and include: Fire & Fuels, Invasive Species, Unmanaged Recreation, and Loss of Open Space or Habitat Fragmentation.

Fire and Fuels. Fire has been successfully suppressed from the majority of the NRA for the past 60 years. By excluding fire, an unnatural buildup and density of trees and forest litter, such as dried pine needles, has created conditions ripe for catastrophic wildfire.

To mitigate our high potential for catastrophic fire, we have been constructing fuel breaks around high-risk communities, such as the community of Mt. Charleston. Our crews have been creating defensible space for the area’s 400-plus homeowners by removing vegetation that would otherwise carry fire into their communities.

In addition to our aggressive seasonal campfire restrictions, NRA staff conducts fire prevention programs yearly with 30 to 40 elementary schools in the area.
Our strong interagency relationship with Clark County Fire Department and the Nevada Division of Forestry has been highlighted in containing the recent Lost Cabin Fire, and in continuing successes of the very popular annual Fire Fest held each year in Mt. Charleston where wildland fire awareness reaches two to three thousand people.

We have also requested nearly two million dollars for a comprehensive fire restoration and public involvement project through the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act. If funded, this initiative will bring to the mountain communities a full awareness of their obligations in living in a fire prone ecosystem and over time return fire to its natural ecological role. This combination will substantially mitigate the potential for a catastrophic fire such as what occurred to our southern California neighbors last fall.

**Invasive Species.** Last year our Regional Forester Jack Troyer signed an order requiring that visitors use only certified weed-free hay on National Forests in Nevada, Utah, Southern Idaho, and Western Wyoming.

We are working proactively with veterinarians, feed stores and equestrian groups throughout the Las Vegas and Pahrump area to implement this weed-free feed order. Implementation of this order will be a challenge and somewhat contentious as weed free hay is currently difficult to purchase and significantly more expensive than conventional hay. Moreover, there are hundreds of private small horse boarding facilities in the area, wild horse feeding is extremely difficult to stop and federal government agency policies are not consistent.

National Recreation Area staff is also treating noxious weeds at sensitive sites such as alpine areas and springs.

**Unmanaged Recreation.** On popular weekends, thousands of people use the Kyle and Lee Canyons. We are aware that our recreation facilities,
campgrounds, trails and picnic areas are overused, and are actively pursuing potential solutions.

The city’s expanding population grows closer to Mt. Charleston. Within a few years, an additional 15 to 25,000 residents will be living in the “Kyle Gateway Community”, immediately adjacent to the most crowded canyon on the National Recreation Area. These residences will be looking to the NRA for outdoor activities and recreational experiences.

Our off-highway trail designation project is our largest recreation management endeavor to date. Currently three general regulations pertain to riding motorized vehicles on the National Recreation Area: First, they cannot be ridden in a congressionally designated wilderness area; second, they cannot be ridden in an unsafe manner, and third, they cannot be driven in a way that damages natural resources. In other words, OHV's can be ridden almost anywhere on the NRA outside of wilderness areas. Over the years, this has resulted in a network of "user created" trails.

We know that 51 percent of Nye County residents and 34 percent of Clark County residents participate in off-highway vehicle recreation. We also know OHV sales in Las Vegas are increasing at a rate of 15 percent a year.

Last year, the Forest Service, in coordination with the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and the Nevada Division of Wildlife, determined that the best strategy to managing the increasing OHV use would be to limit the OHV use to existing trails and prohibit cross-country travel.

An all-existing OHV trails' map was then created, minus those trails that were dangerous to riders, or causing environmental problems such as excessive erosion or damage to archeological sites.
These trails would then be designated as official routes. We are currently in environmental analysis phase of this designation, and we will notify your committee when the analysis has been completed and a decision made.

Of course, there has been controversy over the need to close trails that are heavily used but causing environmental damage. A trail which bi-sects the Mt. Stirling Wilderness Study area is particularly controversial. But overall environmentalists and the OHV community are both very supportive of our efforts to manage OHV use.

The National Recreation Area staff will continue to work with the OHV users, and mountain residents to design and create an acceptable system of OHV trails. Future transportation plans also include designating connector trails that would link our routes with county and BLM trails.

**Open Space.** The issue of loss of open space is not as critical on the Recreation Area as it is on many Forests where federal ownership is not as consolidated. You are all fully aware that 87 percent of Nevada is federally owned.

Through the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act, we have been able to acquire several critical parcels of private land within the boundary of the Recreation Area. Among these are lands adjacent to Deer Creek, one of only four perennial streams on the Recreation Area, and the most recent being the large abandoned golf resort known as the Nel Property.

This latest Nel Property 127-acre acquisition was purchased for 15 million dollars and is planned as a major recreation and administrative site. This site will serve as a portal to the major canyons on the mountain. We anticipate this site will house a visitor facility, a transportation hub for shuttle services, a fire station, and possibly picnic areas, RV parks, and campgrounds. We will be working closely
with the local residences and recreational users during the planning and
development of facilities at this location.

Proper design of this facility will also help to mitigate traffic congestion on the
Recreation Area as well as host an environmental education center for southern
Nevadans. Through the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act, seven
million dollars have been allocated for site preparation and planning of this
facility.

**Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act**

I’ve already mentioned several the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management
Act several times. I’m sure you are familiar with how that act came to be and it’s
potential for public land management agencies. I’d like to take a few more
minutes of your time to discuss some of the other activities this act is funding on
the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area.

Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act through a Clark County
partnership is funding a 2.7 million dollar landscape assessment for the NRA.
This assessment will enable us to work through many of the paralyzing
environmental analysis questions to assess the impacts of trails, roads,
campgrounds, traffic flow patterns, fires, wild horses, elk, natural ecological
succession and the myriad of other influences to this extremely sensitive
mountain.

Other projects funded through the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management
Act include:

**Development of the Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan.** This plan’s
goal is to protect 57 of the most rare species on the Recreation Area and prevent
them from being listed through the Endangered Species Act. Over the 2001-
2003 funding period, over $400,000 dollars was used for habitat restoration, a
full-time law enforcement officer, and other projects such as spring restoration, and protective barriers.

Visitor Information and Environmental Education. Six major bi-lingual information kiosks have been installed to better serve our Spanish speaking visitors. Within the next year, portal signs will be posted at all entrances to the National Recreation Area. Electronic information, such as a low-frequency radio station, is also planned within the next year. The station will alert visitors to traffic issues, and fire danger; environmental education messages will also be provided.

Facilities. Forest Service funding, in conjunction with Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act, has been used to restore campgrounds, construct a temporary visitor center, and install a major water system that serves campgrounds, picnic areas and Camp Lee.

CONSERVATION INITIATIVES are also funded through the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act and managed as interagency projects in partnership with Lake Mead National Recreation Area, the Desert Wildlife Refuge, and the BLM. The Conservation Initiatives allow us to provide improved public services across agency boundaries. Recently approved Conservation Initiatives include:

- **$3.3 million Litter and Desert Dumping** (includes pilot litter clean up programs, additional law enforcement, dumpsters, volunteer events, and major dump site clean up)
- **$2.2 million Interagency Volunteer Program** (funds a comprehensive strategy to significantly increase the use of volunteers and make volunteering for the land management agencies a one-shop, one-step process)
- **$2.1 million Interagency Recreation Strategy** (includes visitor needs assessment and preference studies, creation of a GIS database of
existing systems and conditions, development of a comprehensive, interconnected urban interface and federal agency trails plan)

- **$ 6.5 million Interagency Resource Protection** (funding to increase law enforcement staffing on Federally managed lands)

- **6.7 million Backcountry Management** (includes boundary surveys, maps, interagency wilderness training, wilderness monitoring and interpretive plans)

- **$0.5 million Wild Horse and Burro Management** (includes population and distribution surveys and contraceptive research)

- **$1.0 million Southern Nevada-wide Environmental Education** (includes development of a comprehensive 5-year plan, Oliver Ranch and Forever Earth support)

Our capability to use Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act funding has greatly enhanced our NRA in many positive ways. We will continue to seize every opportunity to hire contractors, encourage volunteer participation, and maximize interagency cooperation.

**CONCLUSION**

Thanks again for providing this speaking opportunity. I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have regarding the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area.

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