



**Testimony of Corey Fisher
Senior Policy Director
Trout Unlimited's Sportsmen's Conservation Project**

**Before the
United States House of Representatives, Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations**

**Hearing on
"Local and State Perspectives on BLM's Draft Planning 2.0 Rule"**

Thursday, May 12, 2016

Chairman Gohmert, Ranking Member Dingell and Subcommittee members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue before the House Natural Resources Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations.

My name is Corey Fisher and I am the Senior Policy Director for Trout Unlimited, a national non-profit conservation organization with more than 150,000 members organized into about 400 chapters from Maine to Alaska. Our mission is to conserve, protect and restore North America's coldwater fisheries and their watersheds. Trout Unlimited chapters invest thousands of volunteer hours on their local streams and rivers to restore habitat for trout and salmon fisheries, and they invest considerable time in conducting youth conservation and fly fishing camps, veterans service programs, community events and taking kids fishing.

Trout Unlimited's conservation work on public lands focuses on engaging with local, state and federal partners to find solutions that balance multiple interests and uses. This work is multi-faceted, but whether promoting responsible energy development, engaging in travel management planning, cleaning up pollution from abandoned mines, or restoring trout streams, all of this work begins with sound resource management planning.

My work with Trout Unlimited is to ensure that public land management in the West is guided by policies that conserve fish and wildlife habitat. This work is more than a vocation for me – America's public lands are part of who I am. Dinner for my family usually features meat from deer and elk that were hunted on public lands. When I go hunting and fishing, more often than not, public lands are the places I go. Vacations don't include resorts and spas, they feature backpacking and river trips in the backcountry. I am fortunate to live in the midst of both Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands, and I cannot imagine life without well-managed public lands and the outdoor traditions that they sustain.

A mission to conserve, protect, & restore North America's coldwater fisheries and their watersheds.

National Office: 1777 N Kent St., Suite 100, Arlington, VA 22209

Missoula Office: 111 N. Higgins Ave., Suite 500, Missoula, MT 59802

T: (406) 546-2979 cfisher@tu.org www.tu.org

The BLM manages about 247 million acres of America's public land, much of it offering excellent hunting, fishing and recreational access. For many sportsmen in the West, when they talk about hunting and fishing, they are talking about BLM managed public lands. Some of my best memories in the outdoors have occurred on BLM lands, including canoeing and fishing the Missouri River Breaks, my first antelope hunt in Montana's Centennial Valley, and elk hunting in a couple of spots that will remain nameless.

So it is both a professional and a personal interest through which I approach resource management planning and the BLM's Planning 2.0 initiative.

Resource management planning challenges

Throughout the past decade I have been engaged with numerous land use planning efforts in Montana, Utah, Wyoming, New Mexico and Colorado. While each of these planning processes and locations have had their own unique aspects, they all featured one commonality: the need for early, frequent and meaningful public engagement. Unfortunately, that hasn't always happened.

All too often, it seemed that the BLM would announce that they were going to develop a new resource management plan and take public scoping comments. Then they would disappear, often for years, only to release a draft plan that may or may not have dealt with the issues initially raised by the public. Following another public comment period, the agency would disappear again, and after another wait measured in years, a final plan would eventually be released, which may or may not have reflected the public comment received at the draft stage. Then an aggrieved group would sue the agency, further bogging down the process.

While this illustration may be a bit oversimplified, it is not far from the reality of how the BLM has typically developed resource management plans in past years. In addition to being an inefficient and ineffective process, it has led to disenfranchised public land stakeholders who at times view the BLM as an unresponsive, closed off agency. This is a problem that the BLM's Planning 2.0 initiative strives to fix.

Planning 2.0 seeks to improve the resource management planning process.

Two years ago, the BLM announced that it was launching Planning 2.0. with a stated objective to improve "our land use planning process so that we can more effectively plan across landscapes at multiple scales and be more responsive to environmental and social change."

From the beginning of Planning 2.0, Trout Unlimited and other sportsmen groups participated in the BLM's process, including providing the agency with public comments and participating in public listening sessions. Trout Unlimited's experience with resource management planning over the past decade has provided us with a perspective that we think will help result in a better end product for Planning 2.0, including what we hope will be a more transparent, inclusive process that provides meaningful collaboration among public land stakeholders.

Now that a proposed rule has been released for public review and comment, I believe that Planning 2.0 is on the right track.

As stated in the proposed rule, Planning 2.0 has three primary goals:

1. Improve the BLM's ability to respond to social and environmental change in a timely manner.
2. Provide meaningful opportunities for other Federal agencies, State and local governments, Indian tribes, and the public to be involved in the development of BLM resource management plans.
3. Improve the BLM's ability to address landscape-scale resource issues and to apply landscape-scale management approaches.

I will address each of these goals.

Being more responsive to social and environmental change is critical to ensure healthy populations of fish and wildlife.

Sound land management must adapt to the most current science and trends in fish and wildlife populations; a static resource management plan will quickly become obsolete. Current procedures for amending and updating resource management plans are time consuming and burdensome for both the agency and the public. Because of the difficulty of revising resource management plans, the documents often do not reflect changing conditions on the ground and fail to incorporate better data and science as they become available.

For instance, throughout the West, the BLM is party to conservation agreements and MOUs with state agencies to recover sensitive native trout species, many of which have been reduced to a fraction of their historical range. While recent resource management plans have relied on the best available science to ensure that future opportunities to restore populations of native trout are not hindered by land use activities, older resource management plans either ignore the issue altogether, or allow development without necessary precautions to protect water quality in streams that are suitable for restoring trout populations.

An example of responding to changing realities for fish and wildlife management comes from the BLM's recently approved Tres Rios Resource Management Plan, in which the agency recognized the need to conserve not only streams currently occupied by Colorado River cutthroat trout, but also streams that have been identified as reintroduction sites for these sensitive native fish. The Tres Rios is one of only a handful of resource management plans to include this kind of foresight. Not only will this help the BLM fulfill commitments in the conservation agreement for Colorado River cutthroat trout, it will help to ensure a bright future for these trout and the anglers who like to fish for them.

A more responsive and efficient resource management planning process will allow the BLM to ensure that its planning documents remain current and reflect the present-day science of fish and wildlife management. By integrating monitoring strategies as a plan component, a feedback loop will inform the BLM and the public when relevant changes in circumstances necessitate a shift in management direction.

Meaningful public involvement will increase transparency and help to put the public back in public land management.

The proposed rule will add two additional opportunities for public involvement. First, a planning assessment phase would include an opportunity for the public (along with local, State and Federal agencies) to suggest issues and opportunities that a resource management plan revision should address and to help establish a current baseline of conditions on the ground.

Second, the proposed rule would create the opportunity for the public to review and comment on preliminary management plan alternatives, allowing stakeholders to raise issues before the BLM begins developing the impact analysis, a critical juncture in the planning process.

Taken together, these two new public involvement steps will ensure that the BLM starts resource management plans off on the right foot, and is still on the right track at the halfway point. This kind of early and often collaboration with the public will help to make for a more responsive, transparent agency.

Instead of only two isolated comment periods, the proposed rule would create a continuum of collaboration with public land stakeholders that builds trust, fosters communication, increases efficiency and creates management plans that are responsive to on the ground issues that are important to public land users.

Landscape-scale planning will improve the management of fish and wildlife habitat and create certainty across administrative boundaries.

Habitat requirements for fish and wildlife don't change due to arbitrary lines on maps. However, all too often land uses and fish and wildlife habitat are managed inconsistently across administrative boundaries. For instance, when Montana BLM's Butte Field Office adopted its resource management plan in 2009, resource professionals determined that a one-half mile development buffer was necessary to balance energy development with the conservation of native trout populations and rivers that have been awarded Blue Ribbon status, including the Yellowstone River. Yet, as the Yellowstone River flowed east into the Billings Field Office, no such stipulation was present, only a general restriction prohibiting development within riparian areas and the 100 year flood plain. Indeed, it was not until September of last year that the Billings Field Office completed its revised resource management plan and put in place a development buffer of one half-mile for the Yellowstone River. In other words, for six years a

trout could literally swim between two field offices in which the measures in place for its protection varied greatly.

This kind of inconsistent management isn't only bad for trout; it is bad for anyone who values predictability for how our public lands will be managed. Those who make their living through resource extraction need certainty for how their activities will be managed, and sportsmen and women need certainty that America's public lands will remain a great place to hunt and fish. Development and conservation need not be mutually exclusive and landscape-scale planning will help to strike that balance, even if those landscapes happen to cross field office or state office boundaries.

Solutions require collaboration and communication.

While Planning 2.0 policies are not yet finalized, the BLM has been working with local stakeholders and county officials to apply some of the principles of Planning 2.0 in places like Park County, Colorado.

Park County is home to South Park, which includes the headwaters of the South Platte River, one of just a handful of gold medal trout streams and a world-renown angling destination. In addition, the South Platte River is particularly important as the water supply for the majority of Coloradans, and the area supports robust herds of big game that provide some of the best hunting in the West.

Given these attributes and an increased interest in oil and gas leasing, stakeholders proposed the area for a Master Leasing Plan as part of the upcoming resource management plan revision for the Royal Gorge Field Office. However, in 2012 the BLM denied the application, citing that although there was interest in leasing, because there were no producing oil and gas wells in the area, there was no reason to develop a Master Leasing Plan.

Then something changed; the BLM listened. As the agency prepared to initiate a resource management plan revision, they heard from conservationists, sportsmen and the Park County Board of County Commissioners, all of whom advocated a forward-thinking plan for future energy development that would ensure impacts would be comprehensively addressed and mitigated. Today, the BLM has committed to developing a Master Leasing Plan for South Park and proposals submitted by the public and Board of County Commissioners are under consideration as the BLM develops draft alternatives for the revised resource management plan.

Instead of plowing ahead and developing a plan that didn't meet the needs of local communities and public land users, the BLM heard from these stakeholders and changed course. It is this kind of collaboration and responsiveness that Planning 2.0 is all about – stakeholders working together to create a shared vision for managing our public lands.

I know that there are concerns from some local and state stakeholders that their roles will be diminished by aspects of the Planning 2.0 proposal. TU always advocates for meaningful local and state stakeholder input opportunities into federal land management decisions of all types. Our partnerships with the city of Durango in Colorado to pass the Hermosa Creek Watershed Protection Act, with the Sweetwater Board of County Commissioners to craft a responsible energy development plan for Little Mountain in southwest Wyoming, and with the state of Montana to restore trout populations on public lands, show that we care deeply about effective local and state involvement. We urge those with concerns to work with BLM throughout the comment period to ensure that their concerns are meaningfully addressed.

Conclusion

In closing, the status quo for how the BLM develops resource management plans is not acceptable. Resource management plans are not the BLM's plan, they are the public's plan for the management of our American lands, and the public needs to be engaged earlier and more frequently throughout the planning process.

Planning 2.0 will improve transparency, provide a continuum of involvement throughout the planning process, engage citizens more meaningfully, and make for a more nimble agency that is responsive to change. These are outcomes that should be appreciated and supported by everyone who values meaningful public engagement in land use planning.

Planning is the foundation of public land management and healthy populations of fish and wildlife on public land start with sound resource management plans. Our hunting and fishing traditions face many challenges, but one of them should not be a cumbersome, outdated and ineffective process for developing plans that will manage fish and wildlife habitat.

The proposed rule is a good start, but it is just a start and it is important for the BLM to see this effort through and implement changes that work for local communities, America's public land users, and the agency itself.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.