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House Committee on Natural Resources Democratic Forum:
Countering Extremism on America's Public Lands

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Violent, anti-government extremism is a major threat to our nation's public lands, the public servants who work to protect them, and the ability of the American people to hunt, fish, and enjoy our outdoor heritage. In addition to the direct threat posed by violent extremists, their activities and ideology are increasingly being used to justify political efforts to advance unsustainable policies, such as the transfer and sell-off of national public lands.

Over the last few years, Americans have witnessed incidents in which small groups of violent extremists have taken public lands hostage. In April 2014, several hundred armed extremists from around the nation gathered in Bunkerville, Nevada, after the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) began rounding up cattle that had been illegally grazed in the area by Cliven Bundy. The extremists organized by Mr. Bundy launched an armed assault on the BLM, and over the next several months they occupied the local area, threatened federal workers, harassed American citizens, and closed off public access to public land.

In December 2015, Cliven Bundy's sons led another gang of armed extremists in the takeover of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. During their two-month-long occupation, this group vandalized public buildings, illegally drove government vehicles, tapped into public computers and rifled through personnel records.

These are just two of the most recent, high-profile examples of violent extremists taking over public land. Similar incidents have occurred over the years round the West, including in Montana. And in communities around the West, federal employees face almost daily harassment and threats of violence.

Incidents of extremist violence on public lands are often characterized by a political ideology that rejects the existence of the federal government and the multiple-use concept of public land management. This is not just about their disagreement with the management of a particular area of public land; it is about their wholesale rejection of the entire concept of public land management. Many of the perpetrators of violence on public land have also called for public lands to be transferred to state or local management and sold off to private interests for development. Finally, anti-public lands extremists consistently turn out to have connections to larger networks of groups that traffic in other extremist ideologies, including racism and anti-Semitism.

The ideology of anti-public land extremists is completely contrary to genuine public attitudes toward public lands. Clear majorities of Western residents consistently express support for

national interest, multiple-use public lands. This has been demonstrated time and again through public opinion polls and the legislative process. Westerners support public lands, because those lands are essential to our culture and our identity. National public lands support cherished outdoor traditions and sustainable economic activities like timber harvesting, grazing, and energy development. Public lands are also a major driver of the \$646 billion outdoor recreation economy throughout the country, one that directly supports 6.1 million jobs.

Despite clear public support for protecting public land, the rhetoric of anti-public land extremists has crept into Congress and state legislatures. Some enterprising politicians have seized upon incidents of public land violence to justify legislation to weaken protection for public lands and mandate higher levels of development activities. They claim that incidents of extremist violence on public land represent public opinion, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, and introduce legislation to micromanage resource management decisions, curtail federal law enforcement power, transfer federal lands to state and local management, and sell off public lands for private development. These proposals in turn have the effect of legitimizing the rhetoric and tactics of anti-public land extremists.

We urge lawmakers to break the cycle of anti-public land rhetoric and anti-public land violence:

1. Base resource management decisions on authentic public opinion and legitimate public input. There is ample scientific data about the extent to which residents of the West and the nation support public land and how they wish to see those lands protected for future generations. This information is consistently validated by hearings, community meetings, and other legitimate public input methods. Lawmakers should strive to use legitimate, valid information about public preferences when making public policy decisions. Relying on violent rhetoric, inflammatory anecdotes, and media stunts fuels anti-public land extremism and promotes unsound policies.

2. Adequately fund federal land management agencies. For decades, federal land and resource management agencies have been starved of the funding necessary to adequately implement their missions. Even as the overall federal budget has grown, the share spent on resource management funding has actually declined. In fiscal year 1977, spending on resource management (function 300) was about 2.5 percent of the federal budget. In 2015, it was about 1 percent. Starving federal agencies of the resources they need to implement their missions sets them up to fail and prepares the seedbed for extremists. Congress needs to appropriate adequate funds for land managers and enact programmatic changes to free up existing funding (which as wildfire disaster funding reform for the US Forest Service).

3. Continue to support local collaboration. Community-based collaboration has a proven track record of resolving local conflicts over land management. Around the West, diverse – often hostile – stakeholders have learned to put aside their differences, work toward common ground and find solutions that address the many interests at stake in public land management. Policy reforms within the federal management agencies have encouraged this kind of local collaboration, including the US Forest Service’s new Planning Rule and the Bureau of Land Management’s Planning 2.0 process. Congress should support these kinds of changes and, where necessary, enact legislation to implement locally-developed collaborative proposals.