



State of Utah

SPENCER J. COX
Governor

DEIDRE M. HENDERSON
Lieutenant Governor

Department of Natural Resources

JOEL FERRY
Executive Director

Testimony of Executive Director Joel Ferry, Utah Department of Natural Resources
Submitted to the Subcommittee on Federal Lands, House Committee on Natural Resources
Oversight Hearing on “Promoting Conservation with a Purpose on America’s Federal
Lands and Forests”
March 8, 2023

- Federal land ownership is significantly higher in the western United States than in other regions. In Utah, the federal government owns over 60 percent of the land. Only Nevada has more federally owned land.
- Utah is home to 13 national park units and millions of acres managed by federal agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- In states like Utah, where the federal government manages significant swaths of land, proactive, collaborative and smart conservation efforts are critical to maintaining healthy and thriving landscapes and watersheds. Success comes through cooperation.
- The health and viability of our forests, wildlands and watersheds have a direct impact on downstream natural resources like the Great Salt Lake and Utah Lake.
- As directed by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and the National Forest Management Act, smart collaborative conservation is most effective when federal land use plans are consistent with the plans and policies of states and local governments. This integration is critical as state and local plans and policies incorporate local scientific data and reflect the needs of nearby communities.
- Natural resources that directly contribute to our quality of life don’t respect ownership boundaries, like water, air, wildlife and even wildfires. This underscores the importance of cooperative working relationships.
- Close collaboration is essential as we continually work to anticipate challenges and changing conditions, like drought, wildfire and demand on outdoor recreation, and tackle them with the latest science, tools, innovation and collaboration.
- Utah’s natural resources are healthier, more resilient and more productive when actively managed across ownership boundaries. Management like this must occur regularly and at a watershed and local community scale. This can only be accomplished by working together.



- In Utah, through smart and collaborative conservation practices, we've maximized investments in ways that increase healthy watersheds and benefit local communities directly.
- For example, Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI) is a partnership-based program that improves high-priority watersheds statewide.
 - In its 17th year, this initiative focuses on three ecosystem values: 1) Watershed health and biological diversity 2) Water quality and yield 3) Opportunities for sustainable uses of natural resources.
 - WRI has completed over 2,500 projects in Utah, improving over 2.4 million acres and nearly 2,300 miles of streams and riparian corridors.
 - This state-led partnership includes over 700 partners, including federal and state land management agencies, local governments, private landowners, Non profits, environmental organizations and sportsman groups. We have leveraged nearly \$350 million for on-the-ground active management projects across ownership boundaries to improve Utah's watersheds.
- For four years, the state of Utah has been working with federal partners through our combined Shared Stewardship agreement to protect communities and watersheds from the threat of unwanted fire.
 - The agreement has allowed Utah to work with the U.S. Forest Service, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and dozens of additional local and private partners to implement fuel reduction work from a landscape scale, cross-boundary approach. In all, there are over 150 coordinating partners.
 - Over \$30 million has been invested in active forest management over the last four years, with \$5.5 million invested in 2022.
 - More than 45 jointly identified high-priority watersheds have been improved, and 80,000 acres treated.
 - Currently, projects that exemplify the success of this program include the Beaver River Watershed Improvement and the Parley's Canyon Watershed Restoration.
 - The Beaver River project in the Fishlake National Forest exemplifies a large-scale and collaborative project that included federal and state partnerships and local and county involvement. The project included strategic landscape-scale projects on State Institutional Trust Lands and Forest Service land. Fuels removed from the project were sold and processed by members of the private forest products industry to encourage economic growth and wood utilization.
 - Parley's Canyon, in Summit County, has been the site of two wildfires in the last two years, highlighting the immediate risk to people and homes in the canyon. Mechanical fuels treatments have been conducted along Parley's Creek in the Lambs Canyon area to protect water quality for Salt Lake City and ensure the safety of residential and commercial properties.



- Work continues to take place across the state as more areas are identified and funding is available through state and federal appropriations.
- The state, working with county governments and local stakeholders, recently completed an aspen regeneration project in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service on Fishlake National Forest.
 - The Monroe Mountain Aspen Regeneration Project included diverse community stakeholders working with the Forest Service on a comprehensive plan to restore declining aspen forests.
 - Prescribed fire, logging and other tools are being used to restore aspen habitat, benefiting wildlife, livestock and the watershed.
 - The project succeeded, in part, because the Forest Service supported the grassroots efforts of the community to improve forest health.
- Utah's newly created Division of Outdoor Recreation administers the federal government's Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which is designed to implement projects and improve outdoor recreation at the local level.
 - This federal reimbursement grant is for the acquisition and development of outdoor recreation areas and requires a 50 percent match from applicants.
 - Utah has implemented over 500 projects since the inception of LWCF with an investment of over \$50 million from the federal government.
- Investment in outdoor recreation goes beyond projects funded through the LWCF. Utah has expanded its efforts through the Outdoor Recreational Infrastructure Grant Program.
 - Transient room tax funds are used to build new, and maintain existing outdoor recreational infrastructure. These projects are on local, state and federal lands.
 - Nearly \$35 million in state funding has been invested since 2015. Funding has gone toward 399 different projects and created 735 miles of new trails throughout the state, and has resulted in a public/private match of over 7 to 1.
- Significant investment in Utah is also underway through the Great American Outdoors Act. The Legacy Restoration Fund of the Great American Outdoors Act is investing over \$121 million through 16 different projects in Utah.
 - One such project is an \$11 million rehabilitation project of the South Campground at Zion National Park, which has seen significant increases in visitation in the last several years and is now the third-most visited national park in the United States. Investments like this are critical as Utah public lands become more and more popular for visitors from around the world.
- The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources has worked collaboratively with several federal partners, including Fish and Wildlife Services, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Central Utah Project Completion Act Office, and the Department of the Interior to downlist the June sucker from endangered to threatened under the Endangered Species Act.



- June suckers are a unique fish species only found in Utah Lake and its tributaries. It was downlisted in 2021 largely due to ongoing efforts by various partnering agencies, including state and federal, to help the species recover.
- An example of some of these efforts is the Provo River Delta Restoration project, which broke ground in June 2020.
- Just last week, the project reached another major milestone — the Provo River was diverted into the channels and ponds constructed over the past three years, connecting the river with a restored delta and with Utah Lake. The restored delta will provide habitat for adult June suckers to spawn and for young June suckers to find safety from predators, which will continue to help this species recover.
- Smart conservation and collaboration can also significantly benefit Sage-Grouse in Utah through the Utah Greater Sage-Grouse Management Plan.
 - Utah is home to a unique population of Greater Sage-Grouse that lives in a highly fragmented range. Utah’s 2019 Greater Sage Grouse Management Plan utilizes effective tools for the conservation of these unique birds that use scientific data and best management practices uniquely tailored to Utah.
 - Federal plans for conserving Greater Sage-Grouse habitat will be most effective when they are fully consistent with provisions of Utah’s own management plan.
- Despite our successes, we still face serious obstacles. Perhaps the most significant is the National Environmental Policy Act, and the way it hamstring effective land management by our federal partners. The Act was well intentioned, but it has become the hook for litigation by those who oppose any type of active management of federal lands and forests.
- NEPA has become a tool to prevent grazing, energy development, and the mining of the critical minerals that American industries, including the renewable industry, needs. And perhaps most relevant for our discussion today, NEPA often prevents federal agencies from thinning our forests to prevent catastrophic wildfires by transforming dying forests into healthy forests. That was certainly not the intent of the Act, but that’s what it does.
- We were encouraged by the reforms the Trump Administration was undertaking, but we’re very disappointed to see the current Council on Environmental Quality rolling back those reforms and endangering our conservation efforts and the Administration’s own stated goals.
- We would also encourage the federal government to reconsider the impact of President Biden’s 30x30 initiative, particularly on states like Utah where the federal government manages significant acres of public lands. Utah is not comfortable with an attempt by the Administration to place even more land in Utah under restrictive designations.
- Approximately 61% of Utah (over 33 million acres of Utah’s land area) is federal land protected under many different federal laws and regulations, such as NEPA and FLPMA.
 - And approximately 23 percent of Utah (over 12.6 million acres) is protected under especially restrictive land designations such as national parks, national monuments, wilderness areas, roadless areas, etc.



- Working together, in collaboration with our federal and local partners, is always better than working in isolated silos. We've proven this in Utah. Our natural resources are more resilient and more productive when actively managed across ownership boundaries. We have healthier watersheds, cleaner water and greater yield, fire-resilient landscapes, healthier wildlife populations and more abundant outdoor recreational opportunities.
- As stewards of Utah's natural resources, we need your help removing barriers that hinder our ability to actively manage public lands, and we need your continued support and investment at the individual watershed and local levels. Ongoing partnership and cooperation are necessary as we continue to work through challenges and opportunities.