

# **Statement of Greg E. Walcher**

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## **For the House Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands**

**H.R. 1572, “Botanical Sciences and Native Plant Materials Research,  
Restoration, and Promotion Act”**

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to be here. Like many mutual friends and associates interested in our nation’s rich natural resources – especially in the West where the federal government owns most of the land and resources – I very much appreciate the importance of botanical science.

I am grateful for the work of Congressman Quigley and the cosponsors of this bill, all of whom are looking for better ways to ground federal decision making in sound science, and to restore vitally important plant ecosystems. I admire their work, and appreciate their dedication to an important set of issues.

In the wake of catastrophic fires that have devastated more than 100 million acres of national forests in the past 20 years, there ought to be even greater attention on federal management strategies that have utterly failed to maintain and enhance these priceless resources. I have testified a number of times before this committee over the years on the crisis in America’s forests and rangelands, including the spread of invasive plant species; the importance of restoring native species; the need for better management of a wide variety of forest and tree types; ways to recover threatened and endangered species, and other closely related issues. In fact, all these issues are not only related – they are inextricably connected.

I wish we could simply create a new federal program, hire some more experts, get them to do some research, issue a series of grants to universities and think-tanks, and thereby solve the problems addressed by this legislation. But 30 years of direct involvement in these issues convinces me that such a new federal program will not solve these difficult problems. I fear it could even make things worse by adding yet another layer of the same administrative process that has led to our crisis in public land management.

## More Experts

I have become well acquainted over the years with a wide array of federal employees, especially at the Department of the Interior (DOI). They are some of the most dedicated and passionate employees in public service, and they include some of the world's foremost experts, not only in the diverse fields of wildlife, parks, energy, geology, archeology, and cultural history, but also in the botanical sciences – including plant biology and plant ecology. This bill, it seems to me, seeks to add resources the Department already has, for reasons that are unclear.

The Department of the Interior has roughly 70,000 employees, including many with the expertise sought by this legislation. The bill would add an undetermined number to that total, because it allows the Secretary to waive the FTE limit Congress has imposed, and place the new hires in whatever bureaus the Secretary sees fit, without a good explanation of how many more are needed, and where they are needed. Further, the authorization begins for the first year at \$49 million, but in future years includes the imprecise phrase “such sums as may be necessary.” In the context of the inevitable growth of all federal programs, such an open-ended authorization is a bad idea.

I encourage the Committee, in working through the details of this proposal, to add language making the authorization much more specific. It should also articulate with much greater clarity the precise purposes for what could become a significant new employment program, and determine more specifically where the new employees would be structured, what their work would entail, how it would differ from work already routine at DOI and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and how the success of this effort would be measured.

A large portion of the text of H.R. 1572 addresses a procedure for incentives based on paying off student loans for new employees hired under this program. It is uncertain how that differs from such incentives already in place in the federal service, beyond extending the incentive to a new category of workers. The Department of the Interior already administers at least two such programs, both designed to recruit Indian and Alaska Native graduates into forestry and agricultural programs in the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Across the federal service generally, the number and availability of student loan forgiveness and repayment programs have expanded significantly since their first use for military recruiting in 1958. Today, there are over 50 such programs authorized across nearly every department and agency. All of them have one flaw in common – they all apply to employees with specific types of education that someone at the time thought was especially important in federal recruiting. In every case, they were based on the assumption that such specific employees were difficult to find, or to recruit to the federal civil service system. That is not the case with botanists, some of the best and brightest of which already work for the federal government, where the salaries, benefits, and job security are more than competitive. The bill sponsors have mentioned the number of botanists employed, as compared to the vast federal land holdings – 1 botanist at the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for every 4 million acres, for instance – but without context there is no explanation of how many are needed, and why. They have also mentioned the drop in advanced botany degrees awarded at American universities, but that may be due to the growth of

degrees in more specific sub-disciplines. The information may not be complete enough to warrant such Congressional action at this time, especially when such an open-ended program is likely to grow significantly without specific legislative bookends.

### **A New Program**

More worrisome than the budget and the growth of DOI employees, though, is the creation of a new federal program, which is very loosely defined in this legislation. It establishes a new program “to support collaborative grants to prevent rare plant species from becoming endangered and to remediate already endangered populations.” It appears to impose mandates on the BLM, USFS and other agencies to prioritize botanical and plant management concerns, in some different manner than their current legislative missions already require, without precisely explaining that difference, or the reasons for it. It is hinted that these differences might include “developing seed transfer zones,” with no clear guideline about how such zones would affect public land management plans; along with “supporting public-private partnerships to catalogue and store plant materials,” and “coordinating a national network of seed storage warehouses,” both of which are strategies already employed in several locations.

Most onerous to Westerners like me is the suggestion that BLM implement “habitat conservation and restoration on a landscape scale.” Unfortunately, “landscape scale” has become code for one-size-fits-all, top-down mandates from Washington. Perhaps that explains why no Member from the large public land districts in the West have cosponsored this bill. It is worth noting that we all agree on the importance of the native plant availability this bill envisions. Many of us have been involved for many years in efforts to address exactly that problem, and with great success.

The Upper Colorado Environmental Plant Center was established in Meeker in 1975, and for 44 years has been supplying native plants for restoration and rehabilitation projects on the Western Slope of Colorado, as well as New Mexico, Wyoming, and Utah. The recovery of sharp-tail grouse, for example, was a tremendous success because of the restoration of native plant habitat on reclaimed coal mine land in Moffat County. That happened because of the work of the Upper Colorado Environmental Plant Center, not because of anything the federal government did. The Center is a non-profit project, owned by a couple local conservation districts, and its work is nationally known. It might take a new federal program 44 more years to achieve the level of expertise already present there.

There are hundreds of locations throughout America where specific plant species are unique to their area, including several plants known to exist only in the Meeker area. In fact, it can be argued that every plant ecosystem is unique to its location, and that massive-scale management plans do not work well. I would argue that such mandates from Washington, along with the budget and procedural challenges that are inherent in federal decision-making, have proven to be a death sentence for our national forests.

## Control Issues

To be clear, we do not object to federal programs only because they are federal. It might even seem counterintuitive to suggest that a land's owners should not be in charge of its management. But the trouble is cultural, it is long-standing, and it cannot be ignored. Put simply, it has become ingrained in the culture of federal land management that the economy should not be a major factor in environmental decisions, despite several laws requiring it. To be clear, many westerners subscribe to a conservation ethic that requires us to consider what is right for the environment as the *first* priority. But the pervasive view of most federal land managers is that the environment should be the *only* priority. Another congressional mandate instructing managers to “prioritize” the environment is hardly necessary.

In the long run, that unrealistic and impractical federal cultural priority system is harmful to the environment itself, but it is dominant in public lands counties all over the West. It fuels the divide between east and west in national politics. Since the West is generally arid and the East is generally not, a huge majority of the American population has never lived where lack of water is a constant problem. In addition to the climate, the difference in federal land ownership worsens a feeling that West and East are treated differently. Nearly every federal environmental policy decision is inherently “unfair” to one region or another, and it is a sad fact that many policies are not enforced the same throughout the country. How can they be? Eastern locations with few federal lands will never attract the most zealous federal land managers hoping to enhance their careers by managing the nation's crown jewels. Why would one want to manage a 10-acre wildlife refuge if one could run a wilderness area bigger than most counties? The east-west distinction is inherently unequal – and unfair. Decisions to limit the use of public lands simply cannot affect Illinois, New York or Delaware the same way they affect Utah, Nevada, and Wyoming.

Limiting the use of public lands is precisely what the federal government has been doing for more than a generation now. It is no coincidence that virtually every congressional action taken in the last 30 years that changed the management of public lands has further restricted public use. Indeed, millions of acres of public land are now wilderness areas that once hosted significant public activity; thousands of square miles of rich mineral deposits have been placed off limits to Americans; thousands of miles of roads once used by generations of hunters and anglers no longer exist. And the push to further restrict public access to public lands continues unabated.

Perhaps worst of all, the federal government simply does not trust state and local governments not to destroy public resources, as if people have a self-interest in destroying their own back yards. The federal and state governments both represent the public, and they both have the legal authority to preserve the environment. Both have protections for endangered species, clean air and water, and other environmental values. Both have strong enforcement abilities, and both care deeply about protecting special places. Yet the federal government consistently refuses to acknowledge and value state and local cooperative efforts, as in the case of the listing of the Gunnison sage grouse, despite 30 years of successful efforts by multiple states to preserve the species and its habitat. That ironic and costly scenario is played out almost every day all across

the country because the federal government no longer treats state and local governments as partners, but as potential abusers that must be regulated and controlled.

That does not suggest that local officials are always right, nor that the rest of the nation is not entitled to its opinions. I merely suggest that due deference to the expertise of local and state officials and their congressional delegation is common sense. Yet that is not the reality in federal land management today.

Making public land management decisions without understanding the specific local circumstances defies logic, so to be credible the process must include the knowledge of – and concern about – the people who live there. So in the debate about environmental restoration today, the issue is not just about fairness from a geographic perspective. Rather, it is about the inescapable fact that federal land management is poor management.

## **Results Matter**

One overpowering argument should be at the heart of this discussion: government has trouble responsibly managing the 650 million acres it owns. National forests have been allowed through complete mismanagement to die, fall down, and burn up across the country. The loss of plant ecosystems, and the invasion of non-native species that we are discussing today, is a direct result of those land management failures. The problem is not the shortage of federal experts. It is the inability to make sound decisions, the “analysis paralysis” that infests virtually every aspect of our governmental process.

That is why the USFS, though more costly for taxpayers than ever before, cannot seem to overcome its own systemic legal and political obstacles to managing the forests professionally. The result is a swath of dead trees from New Mexico to British Columbia, and a squandering of the greatest legacy of the conservation movement. It is no longer credible to argue that additional federal programs and new federal experts are the answer.

## **Conclusion**

Ecosystems should be managed by the people who live in the area, and who by definition know the “landscape-scale” issues best. A far better approach to the crisis of federal land management would be to further empower state and local decision-making, consistent with national priorities. That would result in far better outcomes for wildlife, for the diverse plant communities that are the subject of this legislation, and for the people who value America’s great outdoors. I have spent much of my life around the halls of government, too, so I fully understand the difficulty of thinking outside the confines of government programs. But more government is not always the answer.

Americans have a love affair with their environment and have every intention of being good stewards of the world they inherited. We all share a desire to leave this world better than we found it. If the history of federal land management has taught us anything, it is that new federal programs with more federal workers will not accomplish that.