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October 31, 2013

Sportsmen's Perspective on State Control of Federal Land

The following discussion presents preliminary subject matter affecting sportsmen and the state's wildlife resources in the event that transfer of federal lands (BLM and USFS) was made to the State of Nevada. Since the proposal is in its infancy, this discussion should be considered very preliminary and will evolve significantly as the proposal takes form.

Background

The history of wildlife in the state began with over-exploitation during pioneer days which resulted in the near elimination of big game. Bighorn sheep was originally the state's most numerous big game species whose numbers were so reduced that two of the three subspecies were extirpated from the state by the 1930's. In the 1920's sportsmen purchased a ranch in northern Washoe County to serve as a refuge in an attempt to stave off the extirpation of pronghorn antelope in the state; this refuge grew to be the Charles Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge. Elk were reintroduced into White Pine County in the 1930's. The last forty years have witnessed the most ambitious big-game reintroduction program in at least North America with the reintroduction of big horn sheep into over eighty mountain ranges in Nevada. Mule deer populations responded favorably to the creation and expansion of shrub communities that resulted from both overgrazing by ranching and clear cutting of trees for mining. Today's wildlife resources are a direct result of man's manipulation of habitat and management techniques. Nevada now hosts the highest population of elk and antelope in recorded history. We have greater numbers of bighorn sheep than any state other than Alaska. Mule deer and other sage brush obligate species reached a peak in the 1950's and 1980's and are in a slow cyclical decline across the west due to numerous factors including loss of habitat due to wildfire and development, old-age decadent shrub communities, lower precipitation levels, and increased predation.

Our wildlife resources are funded primarily by sportsman's dollars, including license and tag fees, excise taxes on sporting goods, grants, and private sportsmen's donations. A U. S. Fish and Wildlife 2012 report shows hunting and fishing in Nevada generates in excess of one billion dollars annually. The success of our wildlife programs are a direct result of the important partnership of the State Department of Wildlife, private sportsmen's organizations and the federal land management agencies. Sportsmen's dollars and our continued push for progress are the major reason for the spectacular recovery of our wildlife populations from a century ago. Sportsmen are strong supporters of multiple-use of our public lands and believe all users and interests can, and should, co-exist for the greater good.

Areas of Discussion

Again, due to our preliminary understanding of this proposal, the following discussion summarizes points that sportsmen need to be taken into consideration:

Public Access

It is unclear if this proposal would allow disposal of public land to private interests; if so, issues of public access are paramount. In most states, public access is a serious limiting factor in maintenance and perpetuation of the number of sportsmen, as the public simply has nowhere to access hunting and fishing areas without serious overcrowding. Existing mountain ranges like the Rubies and East Humboldts exemplify this issue, as there are limited routes through private property to public land.

Privatization of Public Land

If public lands are privatized, there is no guarantee that private interests will manage their private lands in the best interest of wildlife, and wildlife professionals would have no jurisdiction to enforce proper management.

Nevada has very limited water sources. If the land is transferred into private hands, water will be necessary for any development of the land. Where is the water to come from? This could have huge environmental impacts.

Privatization of public land would alter the entire face of hunting and fishing. In other states with minor public land ownership, hunting and fishing opportunities come at a price with leases going to the highest bidder. This lucrative practice has degraded the sport to a pastime for the rich or politically connected, ending the family tradition that has endured for centuries

and embodies the American way. Many of us live in Nevada primarily because we can wander entire mountain ranges without ever encountering a single “No Trespassing” sign. For us, this is what makes Nevada great!

Wildlife Management

While wildlife belongs to the public and is generally held in high esteem, other more direct economic special interests (i.e. land development, mining, ranching, energy) are consistently given higher priority at the state level. Federal land management decisions are, at least by policy, dictated to consider all uses in their deliberation. It is imperative to sportsmen that crucial wildlife habitat, migration corridors, waterways and all other factors that our wildlife depend upon are protected, perpetuated, and enhanced.

The funding for proper management by the state is an unknown. Present levels of grazing fees and mining royalties fall far short of the budget necessary to properly manage these lands. Without adequate funding levels, abuse could revert to levels of a century ago. Can, and is, the state willing to commit the necessary funding to manage and protect our public lands?

The federal government has other resource management obligations that are tied to federal lands. Feral horses are an example. The 1971 Wild horse and Burro Act, and subsequent amendments, mandate federal management on BLM and USFS lands. How will this management be affected by land transfer to the state? Certainly the State of Nevada cannot fund eighty million dollars annually for the wild horse and burro program. The state simply cannot manage these feral animals as evidenced by the Virginia Range managed by the State Department of Agriculture. The Virginia Range is the prime example of how seriously degraded our rangelands can become as the result of overpopulation of feral horses; the entire mountain range is almost completely devoid of big game as a result.

Also consider the millions of dollars that are expended every year to fight wildfires and then assist in their restoration. Without federal funds and agency support the burden would be on the state, with the status of threatened and endangered species hinging on our efforts to control the invasive weeds and maintain habitats. This could be a slippery slope where neglect in restoration or habitat management could have major implications on future projects as restrictions associated with federal regulations are implemented. The transfer of lands to the state does not preclude compliance with federal regulations such as the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act.

Closing

At this preliminary phase, sportsmen have more questions than conclusions. The above discussion raises some potential issues; others will undoubtedly surface as the process continues.

All of us who live on and love this land have so much more in common than we ever have in conflict. Only by working together can we better our state for future generations.

We wish to thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today. We pledge our continued involvement and thank you for your consideration.

The Coalition for Nevada's Wildlife

Larry J. Johnson, President

