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**Heller Stresses Importance of Pershing County Lands Bill to Senate Energy Committee** **(Washington, DC)** – Today, U.S. Senator Dean Heller (R-NV) submitted testimony to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee in support of the [*Pershing County Economic Development and Conservation Act of 2016*](http://www.heller.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?p=pershing-county-lands-bill)*,* (S. 3102). This piece of legislation is both bipartisan and bicameral. Today’s hearing, coupled with Senator Heller’s testimony, mark important steps in the legislative process toward this bill becoming a reality. **Testimony as prepared:**Chairman Murkowski and Ranking Member Cantwell, thank you for holding today’s legislative hearing and for including my legislation, the Pershing County Economic Development and Conservation Act, in the agenda. For years, residents of Pershing County have worked diligently to develop this innovative public lands proposal that will provide their communities new opportunities for economic development while reducing wildfire threats, improving wildlife habitat, and increasing hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation opportunities. It builds on the efforts of the Pershing County Checkerboard Lands Committee, initiated over a decade ago, which was a community-driven process to solve complicated land management issues. The details were hashed out by an inclusive grassroots-driven public process, including meetings, discussions, small working groups, and visits with and between Pershing County officials, local residents, and important stakeholders. The resulting legislation is a great example of a grassroots proposal, rather than a top-down public approach for public lands related legislation, and I am proud to put it before this committee on behalf of my constituents. Over 75 percent of the lands within Pershing County, Nevada are administered by the federal government – and much of that land is in a “checkerboard pattern.” A remnant of railroad construction in the 1800s, these checkerboard lands now present a major land management problem for our communities. It is confusing for sportsmen and other outdoor recreationalists, it limits economic development opportunities along the I-80 corridor, and it is a bureaucratic headache for both the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and adjacent private land owners including some of the biggest ranching operations in the region. Resolving this mess in a common-sense manner will benefit all Nevadans. Similar to other major public lands legislation championed and enacted into law by our delegation in the past, like my Lyon County Economic Development and Conservation Act, the Pershing County bill finds the delicate balance between sustainable economic development and conservation. Specifically, it has four major pillars:First, it advances a sale and exchange plan for the over 300,000 acres of BLM lands in Pershing County identified for potential disposal by the BLM’s resource management plans. This process is modeled off the highly successful process established by the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act (SNPLMA) in 1998 that has facilitated sustainable development in the Las Vegas Valley since its enactment. Together with Pershing County, the Department of the Interior will jointly select lands and the parcels to be sold through a competitive bidding process for no less than fair market value – ensuring a fair return for the American taxpayer.  Facilitating these targeted land sales and exchanges along the Interstate 80 corridor in a responsible manner will increase the county’s tax base, increase outdoor recreation opportunities, spur economic development, and improve land stewardship. Second, it will facilitate the expansion and development of existing mining projects within Pershing County. The county has a wide variety of mineral resources, but silver, gold, and tungsten have been the mainstays for over a century and a half. Production began in 1860 in the Humboldt district, and later spread throughout the region. In fact, the first successful smelter to treat the base-metal ores in Nevada was built in Pershing County, so mining runs deep in its history. This initiative will be a boon for economic growth, yielding millions of dollars of investments in the county and greatly improving the county’s tax base. It will also allow Pershing County to acquire land in the Unionville cemetery. The Unionville cemetery was established in the 1870s and has been in continuous use ever since. At some point, it was discovered that the cemetery lies on BLM land and the BLM is now prohibiting new burials there. This simply does not make sense. Third, any proceeds from land sales facilitated by the bill will be invested in Northern Nevada, benefiting the State’s education system, conservation, and county programs. The resources allocated to the county deliver critical services and develop much-needed capital improvement projects, such as road maintenance, public safety, and law enforcement. The federal portions will greatly improve stewardship of important wildlife habitat for Great Basin species such as the Greater Sage-Grouse, Desert Bighorn Sheep, and antelope. It will also improve important migration corridors that are important to wildlife management in the region. Finally, the bill resolves some long-standing land designations within the county. Five wilderness study areas within the county have been in limbo for nearly thirty years, all being managed as wilderness by the BLM. These areas were carefully looked at by the residents on the ground, and the boundaries were carefully designed. The resulting maps conserve important wildlife habitat, ensure existing road access into wilderness, and resolve local ranchers’ issues with the current “wilderness study area” boundaries that will provide their operations more flexibility and stability moving forward. It is important to note that nearly 50,000 acres of public land currently being managed as wilderness will be put back into multiple-use. Those areas will be available for mineral exploration, energy development, ranching, and other activities. As you can see, this proposal in its entirety will yield major benefits not only for Pershing County, but for the American people. It is important to note that this legislation has the unanimous support of the Nevada Congressional Delegation. My good friend Congressman Mark Amodei introduced the House companion, H.R.5752, with our other three House colleagues as original cosponsors. We all worked closely with our constituents as they finalized their grassroots proposal to ensure the legislation was a proposal we could move through the Congress. I am also proud to report to this Committee that we’ve garnered the support of a diverse group of stakeholders throughout Nevada. That includes business groups like the Nevada Mining Association and the Nevada Farm Bureau Federation; the Coalition for Nevada’s Wildlife which is comprised of sportsmen groups like Nevada Bighorns Unlimited, Back Country Hunters and Anglers, and Nevada Waterfowl Association; local ranchers; and even environmental groups like the Friends of Nevada Wilderness. That support is indicative of the residents’ hard work to develop an innovative lands package that balances the opinions of diverse stakeholders alike. I want to commend the Pershing County Commission and their constituents for a job well done.Thank you again Chairman Murkowski and Ranking Member Cantwell for the opportunity to present this important Nevada public lands proposal. It is my hope that together we can a find a way to advance this bill and the handful of other Nevada proposals that have been considered by the Committee, like the Douglas County Conservation Act (S.472) and the House-passed Eastern Nevada Land Implementation Improvement Act (H.R.1815), before the end of the year. ###http://www.heller.senate.gov/public/vendor/_skins/heller/images/newsletter/icon_fb.png http://www.heller.senate.gov/public/vendor/_skins/heller/images/newsletter/icon_tw.png http://www.heller.senate.gov/public/vendor/_skins/heller/images/newsletter/icon_yt.png |
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