June 15, 2011

Dear Secretary Salazar,

I received your letter dated June 10, 2011 requesting that I make designation of wilderness a legislative priority. As a lifelong Nevadan, hunter and outdoorsman I have a deep respect for and commitment to protecting our natural environment for future generations. As you know, nearly 85% of Nevada is controlled by the federal government. This presents us with many unique challenges. At a time when Nevada’s unemployment rate is the highest in the nation—at 12.5%, I am troubled that you have chosen to push a “wilderness agenda” to look for opportunities to restrict access to federal lands rather than finding ways to create economic opportunity on public lands.

Conservation and economic activity are not mutually exclusive. In fact, there are a variety of ways to create jobs, benefit communities and improve our ecosystem that are compatible. For example, the imminent threat of an Endangered Species Act listing for the Greater Sage Grouse has brought greater urgency for the need to perform habitat restoration. This includes the removal of merchantable biomass from public lands, wildfire pretreatment activities to protect high value habitat from unnatural fire regimes and grazing for fuels management—all of which sustain or create economic activity.

There are, of course, more traditional uses of public lands that are important job creators. Unfortunately, policies put in place by the Department of Interior are not only hindering job creation, they are in some cases killing jobs. While my constituents pay twice as much for a gallon of gasoline as they did three years ago, your agency is preventing American workers from developing American resources that will lower gas prices for American consumers. Even the renewable energy development touted as a job creator by this Administration is stymied by the bureaucracy and policies of the federal government.

Nevada is home to vast mineral resources that not only create stable communities, but provide mined materials necessary for the products we rely on in our modern society. Additionally, mines in Nevada contain mineral components critical to the latest alternative energy technologies. But, the mining industry as well is plagued by bureaucratic delays. Even recreation on public lands in Nevada has been hindered by bureaucracy, whether it is a group of Boy Scouts desiring to visit a National Park or re-permitting OHV races that have been going on for years—these economic drivers have been bogged down by bureaucracy at the time when we can least afford it.

The decision to permanently place lands off limits to multiple-use need should be done with the utmost care. Once a wilderness designation takes hold, the land is permanently removed from potential revenue generation. Wilderness should be reserved solely for those areas that deserve the highest and most restrictive protection—not as a management tool to prevent economic activities that special interest groups find objectionable.

Additionally, other restrictions, such as National Monument Designations and National Conservation Areas, discussed in the leaked “Treasured Landscapes,” should not even be considered without an open and public transparent process that takes into account the economic consequence to impacted communities. Members of the Senate and House should ultimately be responsible for those designations, not unelected bureaucrats. In this vein, I respectfully request that you release all of the remaining documents associated with the “Treasured Landscapes” discussion in order to insure transparency in the conservation dialogue.

I hope that your desire to identify wilderness is also coupled by an equally independent desire to see that Wilderness Study Areas not suited to wilderness designations are released back into the multiple-use category.

This call for wilderness should also be followed by a request to identify areas where the BLM can dispose of lands that do not have a high conservation value. Disposal of appropriate lands would not only allow economic opportunity in public lands communities, it would also provide a potential funding mechanism to offset the cost of managing lands that truly are deserving of protection.

Wilderness designations are often made with the promise that they will actually create jobs in the form of increased tourism. There are examples of this being true, such as Red Rock National Conservation Area in Clark County, Nevada. Red Rock draws more than one million visitors per year. This provides both important conservation and economic value. Unfortunately, in many remote areas of Nevada wilderness designations have taken away more economic opportunity than it has provided.

I work very closely with Nevada’s locally elected officials, communities and advocates on all issues pertaining to public lands in Nevada. Where there are high value conservation areas that have been identified for potential protection, I am engaged with Nevadans on the course of action that best suits the needs of the land and the people that live there. Should there be conservation proposals that include wilderness that I believe are ready to be codified, be assured that I will offer them as legislative proposals—as I have done in the past. However, putting Nevadans to work is my highest priority.

It is vital that we turn our attention in every area of government to job creation. It is my hope that we can work together to prioritize putting people back to work, identifying opportunities for economic development, and having an honest conversation about what lands are truly appropriate for tax payers to bear the burden of ownership.

Sincerely,

Dean Heller