

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 17, 2011

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

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 percent of Nevada's land is controlled by the federal government. This presents our State with many unique challenges. When Nevada's unemployment rate is the highest in the nation at 12.1 percent, I am troubled that you have chosen to push an agenda that will restrict access to federal lands rather than work to create economic opportunity on public lands.

Conservation and economic activity are not mutually exclusive. In fact, a variety of initiatives can create jobs while improving our ecosystem. For example, the 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 public land uses 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 in our nation. 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 economically stable communities, but provide the 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 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 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, 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, not bureaucrats, should ultimately be responsible for those designations. 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 coupled with an equal desire to see that Wilderness Study Areas not suited to wilderness designations are released back into the multiple-use category.

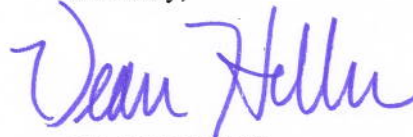
Your call for wilderness should also be followed by a request to identify areas where the BLM can dispose of lands that do not have a high conservation value. Disposal of appropriate lands would not only allow economic opportunity in public lands communities, it would also provide a potential funding 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, wilderness designations in many remote areas of Nevada have taken away more economic opportunity than they have provided.

By law, wilderness designations are at the discretion of Congress. I work very closely with Nevada’s locally elected officials, communities and advocates on all issues pertaining to public lands in our State. 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 who live there. Should there be conservation proposals 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.

Every part of the federal government must turn its attention 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 taxpayers to bear the burden of ownership.

Sincerely,



DEAN HELLER
U.S. Senator