

**Statement of  
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***“Bureau of Land Management Priorities”***

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Chairman Manchin, Ranking Member Barrasso, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the priorities and mission of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The BLM plays an essential role in achieving the environmental, conservation, and economic goals of the Biden-Harris Administration, while working in partnership with thousands of communities nationwide, mostly across the American West and in Alaska.

**Overview**

Managing over 245 million acres of surface land and 700 million acres of subsurface mineral estate on behalf of the American people is a tremendous honor for the BLM. As directed by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), the BLM sustains the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation’s public lands for multiple uses, such as conventional and renewable energy development; livestock grazing; conservation; mining; watershed protection; and hunting, fishing, and other forms of recreation. This multiple-use, sustained yield mission demands a thoughtful, science-based approach to management of our public lands and waters, as it enables the BLM to sustain the economy, create jobs, and produce domestic energy, while generating a fair return to American taxpayers for the use of public resources. The BLM is also charged with conserving, protecting, and restoring public land resources and nationally significant landscapes for the benefit of current and future generations.

New and growing challenges over the past few decades have made it more difficult for the BLM to achieve this careful balancing of the many resources and uses that public lands offer to all Americans. As the steward of one in ten acres of land in the United States, the BLM has experienced firsthand the increasingly negative effects associated with climate change, including prolonged periods of extreme drought and aridification, elevated wildland fire risk, and greater disruption to sensitive species of wildlife and plants. At the same time, population growth throughout the West has resulted in significantly increased demand for outdoor recreation and commercial uses on BLM-managed public lands that are closer to the places that people live. In many cases, the recreational facilities and associated infrastructure that the BLM previously developed can no longer safely accommodate all who wish to use them in a manner that minimizes impacts to other resources and uses.

To address these challenges, the BLM aims to prioritize landscape health in order to ensure that our public lands can provide the countless resources and experiences that they always have. This

focus will, in turn, help the BLM achieve our mission under FLPMA over the long-term. Some of that work is highlighted below.

### **Restoring Public Lands & Waters**

Prioritizing landscape health is critical to making public lands more resilient to the impacts of climate change, as well as the pressures driven by population growth and significantly increased demand for recreation. Resilient landscapes sustain numerous communities and economies, and they are essential to the BLM's ability to manage public lands for multiple use and sustained yield. Under the Biden-Harris Administration, the BLM is working to improve the health of our lands and waters and enhance overall ecosystem function through key regulatory updates that will help safeguard the health of public lands and waters for current and future generations; historic investments in on-the-ground land and water restoration projects; and improvements in the management of wild horses and burros.

### ***Updating Regulations to Guide Balanced Management***

On May 9, 2024, the BLM finalized the *Conservation and Landscape Health Rule*, which will guide balanced management of public lands. Informed by more than 200,000 comments from individual Americans, State and local governments, Tribes, industry groups, and advocacy organizations, and reflecting the efforts of numerous BLM career staff, the final rule will support multiple use and sustained yield of the public lands into the future, helping to ensure the BLM continues to protect land health while managing other uses of the public lands, such as clean energy development and outdoor recreation.

Successful public land management that delivers natural resources, wildlife habitat, and other benefits requires a thorough understanding of the health and condition of the landscape, especially as conditions shift on the ground due to climate change. The final rule directs the BLM to manage public land uses in accordance with the fundamentals of land health, consistent with the BLM's multiple use and sustained yield framework. In addition, the final rule directs the BLM to identify and conserve intact landscapes. As such, the final rule will help watersheds support soils, plants, and water; ecosystems provide healthy populations and communities of plants and animals; and wildlife habitats on public lands protect threatened and endangered species. It is also important to note that our decision making will be more durable under the final rule's requirement that the BLM better incorporate the best available scientific information and data, including Indigenous Knowledge.

Additionally, the final rule provides a mechanism for restoring and protecting public lands through restoration and mitigation leases. Restoration leases will provide greater clarity for the BLM to work with appropriate partners to restore degraded lands. Mitigation leases will provide a clear and consistent mechanism for developers to offset their impacts by investing in land health elsewhere on public lands, like they currently can on State and private lands. While the leasing system is still in development, the final rule clarifies who can obtain a restoration or mitigation lease, limiting potential lessees to qualified individuals, businesses, non-governmental organizations, Tribal governments, conservation districts, or State fish and wildlife agencies. Foreign entities are not permitted to hold restoration or mitigation leases, and restoration and mitigation leases will not be issued if they would conflict with existing authorized uses.

Lastly, the final rule will help ensure that the BLM responds to FLPMA's direction to give priority to designating and managing Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) to protect important historic, cultural, and scenic values, as well as fish and wildlife and other natural resources, and to address natural hazards. The final rule establishes a clear and comprehensive framework for identifying, evaluating, and considering the need for special management attention for each ACEC during the land use planning process. It also details how the BLM will proceed when potential ACECs are identified outside of a land use planning process.

### ***Investing in Landscape Restoration***

The BLM's efforts to prioritize the health of our public lands and waters also include historic on-the-ground investments. As part of President Biden's Investing in America agenda, the BLM has identified 21 large landscapes across 11 western states for targeted efforts to restore degraded or damaged public land resources. Once-in-a-generation funding from the Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is being directed to these areas because they are where concentrated, strategic investment can make the most difference for communities and the resources under the BLM's management. In addition, these landscapes hold significant potential for additional cross-boundary partnerships and investments from other Federal natural resource agencies; State, Tribal, and local governments; private landowners; and partner groups, which could increase the scope and scale of restoration work.

The BLM's efforts in the selected landscapes are collaborative and partnership-driven, supporting coordinated investments from across the agency, including from the fuels management, range, wildlife, forestry, aquatics, and recreation programs. Activities aim to address the multiple threats that are limiting ecosystem function. They include restoring wildlife habitat in the sagebrush steppe of the high desert, re-creating wetland meadows, and repairing watersheds on former industrial timberlands, among others.

In Alaska, for example, the BLM is undertaking projects to address impacts to streams and rivers from historic mining practices. Historic mining in interior Alaska in the Birch Creek and Fortymile Wild and Scenic River systems has left of legacy of impaired water quality, solid waste, hazardous materials, and unreclaimed areas. Restoration efforts will focus on supporting fish habitat, public safety, and increased recreation opportunities. This initiative, "Gravel to Gravel," was born from requests from Alaska Natives, and the investments contribute to a significant cross-agency effort to restore salmon habitat in the Yukon, Kuskokwim, and Norton Sound regions.

In New Mexico, the BLM is continuing its long-term restoration investment through partnerships in the Lower Pecos River landscape. Restoration efforts will remove mesquite, which has invaded this landscape and damaged fragile soils, reduced native grasses, and decreased groundwater recharge. Restoring this landscape will improve water quality, increase wildlife habitat and forage for livestock, and enhance recreation and hunting opportunities for rural communities in southeast New Mexico and west Texas.

Finally, as another example, in Utah, among other restoration activities, the BLM is investing in its ability to manage a significant increase in demand for recreation access and services on public

lands in the southern part of the state. The St. George area is the second largest population center in Utah and one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the nation. Investments in trails, facilities, road improvements, and campgrounds – as well as habitat improvement for the greater sage-grouse at the southernmost part of its range – will strengthen the BLM’s ability to serve the local communities and recreators who increasingly depend on our public lands in southern Utah.

### ***Improving the Management of Wild Horses & Burros***

Even with these important updates to the BLM’s regulations and investments in restoration projects, the current overpopulation of wild horses and burros across the West presents unique challenges to the BLM’s ability to improve and maintain landscape health. The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 requires that the BLM manage wild horses and burros in a manner that is “designed to achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance on public lands.” The appropriate management level (AML) is the population range the BLM sets to best maintain that thriving natural ecological balance. As of March 2024, there were approximately 73,500 wild horses and burros across the 177 herd management areas that the BLM administers – exceeding the nationwide AML of 27,000 animals by over 170 percent. Of the 177 herd management areas, 80 percent are above AML.

The BLM has worked diligently in the last few years to address this problem, reducing the on-range population from a peak of 95,000 wild horses and burros in 2020 to approximately 73,500 today, but we have more work to do. Climate change-induced lack of forage and water, as well as competition among wild horses and burros, big game species, and livestock over these limited resources, have made it even more difficult for the BLM to achieve this necessary ecological balance, resulting in further degradation of the range. When managing wild horses and burros, inaction is not an option. Had we done nothing since the on-range population peaked in 2020, our estimates suggest the situation would be far worse; based on a National Academies of Sciences assessment of wild horse growth trends, an unmanaged population could be as bad as 164,000 animals on the range today.

The BLM is focused on addressing the management challenges with this program, particularly through use of fertility control treatments and permanent sterilization efforts and through private placements of animals. However, the substantial growth in the cost of off-range holding and care has impacted the BLM’s ability to deliver fertility treatments or remove wild horses and burros from the range while balancing the obligations to ensure the wellbeing of the approximately 63,000 horses off-range in our care (as of May 2024) – an increase of almost 13,000 since 2020. Given the significant challenges associated with the management of wild horses and burros in the face of a changing climate, the BLM would welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee on this issue.

### **Facilitating Responsible Energy Development While Transitioning to a Clean Energy Economy**

Prioritizing landscape health can and must extend across all the BLM’s work, from recreation to energy development. This includes doing our part to help reduce one of the primary drivers of climate change impacts to public lands – carbon emissions. As conventional energy sources continue to play an important role in our economy, the BLM is advancing the development of renewable energy by providing sites on public lands for environmentally sound renewable

energy production and transmission projects. BLM-managed public lands provide excellent solar, wind, and geothermal energy potential and are an important component of the Administration's broader strategy to rapidly reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by at least 50 percent by 2030 and achieve a carbon pollution-free electricity sector by 2035.

Consistent with the Energy Act of 2020, the BLM continues to accelerate responsible permitting of renewable energy projects on public lands. Since January 21, 2021, the BLM has permitted projects that are expected to provide over 7.3 gigawatts of clean energy – enough to power nearly 2.4 million homes. These efforts contributed to the Administration recently surpassing the goal of permitting 25 gigawatts of clean energy projects on BLM-administered public lands by 2025. In addition to specific project approvals, the BLM has also leased eight new areas in Solar Energy Zones with the capacity to generate nearly 2.5 gigawatts of additional clean energy. As of April 2024, the BLM is currently processing 65 utility-scale onshore clean energy projects – including solar, wind, geothermal, and transmission interconnect projects – with a combined potential to add approximately 32,500 megawatts of renewable energy. The BLM is also undertaking the preliminary review of almost 200 applications for solar and wind development, as well as almost 100 applications for solar and wind energy testing.

The complexities involved with authorizing utility-scale energy generation and associated transmission lines necessitates extensive stakeholder engagement and coordination and thorough environmental review of project proposals, all of which the BLM works diligently to carry out. We consistently work with project proponents and stakeholders to facilitate renewable energy development in places where conflicts with other uses are low. To this end, on May 1, 2024, the BLM finalized its *Rights-of-Way, Leasing, and Operations for Renewable Energy Rule*, which will lower the cost of developing solar and wind projects, improve renewable energy project application processes, and incentivize developers to continue to responsibly develop solar and wind projects on public lands. These changes are expected to translate, over time, to a reduction in the average cost of wind and solar energy, which will stabilize or even reduce the cost of energy to consumers, even as the cost of other energy sources may experience increased volatility. Consistent with the Administration's commitment to create high-quality jobs in the clean energy economy and support American manufacturing, the final rule includes incentives for projects to use project labor agreements and American-made materials.

While the BLM has made great progress facilitating renewable energy development, a substantial part of the BLM's energy portfolio consists of oil and gas production from public lands. Since January 21, 2021, the BLM has approved more than 11,000 new drilling permits – including over 3,800 in 2023 alone – and onshore oil production from Federal lands is at an all-time high. At the same time, the BLM has focused on efforts to ensure that conventional energy development is environmentally responsible and provides a fair return to the American taxpayer.

On April 23, 2024, the BLM finalized its *Fluid Mineral Leases and Leasing Process Rule*, which codifies fiscal provisions that were enacted in the IRA. These changes revise outdated fiscal terms for the onshore Federal oil and gas leasing program, including royalty rates and minimum bids, and will ensure a fair return to American taxpayers for the use of their resources and disincentivize speculation. The rule also strengthens bonding standards to help ensure that taxpayers are not saddled with paying industry's cleanup costs. The rule is the BLM's first

comprehensive update to the Federal onshore oil and gas leasing framework since 1988, the first update to minimum bonding levels since 1960, and the first increase in royalty rates in more than a century. The rule also implements recommendations from the Department of the Interior's *Report on the Federal Oil and Gas Leasing Program*, which responds to the President's direction in E.O. 14008, and will guide BLM efforts to focus oil and gas leasing in areas that are the most likely to be developed – areas with existing infrastructure and high oil and gas potential – providing transparency and clarity for industry, while better managing public lands for other important uses.

Additionally, on April 10, 2024, the BLM finalized its *Waste Prevention, Production Subject to Royalties, and Resource Conservation Rule* to curb the waste of natural gas during the production of oil and gas on Federal and Tribal lands. The final rule modernizes regulations that are more than 40 years old, and it will help hold oil and gas companies accountable by requiring operators to avoid wasteful practices and find and fix leaks, while ensuring that American taxpayers and Tribal mineral owners are fairly compensated through royalty payments. By building on technological advances and best management practices to help reduce waste, the rule is expected to generate more than \$50 million in additional natural gas royalty payments each year to taxpayers and Tribal mineral owners, while conserving billions of cubic feet of gas that might otherwise have been vented, flared, or leaked from oil and gas operations.

Finally, given the importance of critical minerals to the clean energy transition, the BLM has advanced permits for five critical mineral mines and is actively processing other applications. The agency is working across the Federal government to update mining policies, improve permitting efficiency, and promote a robust, environmentally, and socially responsible domestic mining industry. Some of these efforts, including much needed reforms to the General Mining Law of 1872, will require the assistance of Congress. The Administration looks forward to continuing to work with the Committee on this issue.

### **Enhancing & Expanding Recreation**

Improving recreational experiences, increasing access and accessibility, and repairing and expanding recreation infrastructure are also essential components of prioritizing landscape health. More than 120 urban centers and thousands of rural towns are located within 25 miles of BLM-managed public lands and waters in the western United States. This makes the BLM a key part of connecting Americans to the exceptional and one-of-a-kind outdoor opportunities that contribute to and solidify the social fabric of the nation, bond families across generations, and preserve the character and spirit of the American West and Alaska. Public lands and waters are widely recognized as a “backyard to backcountry” treasure, affording a variety of accessible recreation opportunities – from neighborhood trails to world-class destinations and a diverse mix of camping, boating, off-highway vehicle riding, recreational shooting, horseback riding, hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, and many others.

As a result of the unique opportunities, resources, and experiences our public lands offer, recreational use has skyrocketed. In Fiscal Year 2023, the agency recorded more than 82 million visits, representing a 41 percent increase in use since 2012, with almost a third of that increase occurring since the start of the global pandemic in 2020. In response to this significant growth in recreation use, the BLM last year released its *Blueprint for 21st Century Outdoor Recreation*,

which is intended to guide investments, partnerships, outreach, and program development, so the bureau can more effectively respond to current demand and chart a course to assess and meet future needs. This strategy presents several major shifts in how the BLM prioritizes and supports outdoor recreation.

Through this strategy, the BLM aims to expand and diversify its engagement with partner groups to achieve our shared goal of maintaining or enhancing visitor service and recreation infrastructure in the face of rising visitation. This will be key to improving recreation opportunities and safeguarding vulnerable natural and cultural resources despite the demands of increased recreation combined with the challenges of climate-driven impacts to BLM resources. Working together with our partners, we also hope to mitigate the recreation related impacts that are beginning to occur beyond the BLM's resources and boundaries, as local communities and counties face strains on law enforcement, emergency, and other services linked to new visitors.

To meet these challenges and support recreation on public lands, the BLM will also strive to grow and develop external partnerships and leverage outside donations. In addition, the BLM will examine fee collection to ensure that opportunities for collection available under current law are fully implemented. Significantly higher investment in the BLM's recreation program from diverse sources will help the agency better manage recreation in a way that will enable future generations to enjoy the same types of experiences that current visitors expect. This would allow for important investments in recreation planning, infrastructure, interpretation, access, community engagement, and partnerships.

Implementing the *Blueprint for 21st Century Outdoor Recreation* will require collaborative planning and diverse funding. The BLM is committed to both, and we are working with the public and stakeholders to gather feedback on the best ways of achieving these objectives.

### **Protecting Nationally Significant Places**

Finally, prioritizing landscape health requires us to acknowledge that some of our public lands are so exceptional that they deserve long-term protection. As specified in the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, the BLM's National Conservation Lands “conserve, protect, and restore nationally significant landscapes that have outstanding cultural, ecological, and scientific values for the benefit of current and future generations.” The National Conservation Lands currently encompass 905 units covering over 37 million acres, including national monuments, wilderness, wilderness study areas, wild and scenic rivers, national conservation areas, and national scenic and historic trails. Designated by Congress or the President, the National Conservation Lands represent some of the nation's most spectacular landscapes and are also the current and ancestral homelands of Tribal Nations and Indigenous peoples, many of whom have deep cultural, historic, and spiritual connections to these places. Conserving these lands means collaborating with local, State, and Tribal governments and other Federal partners; enhancing and maintaining recreational access; and engaging communities to foster shared stewardship efforts.

Over the past two and a half years, President Biden has designated, expanded, and restored protections for five national monuments on BLM-managed public lands in Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and California. These lands are the sacred, ancestral homelands of Tribes who have

lived there for thousands of years. Their protection is a commitment to future generations, but protection is just the first step. As directed by the President and Secretary Haaland, the BLM will manage these monuments alongside the Tribes that know them best through historic co-stewardship agreements. For example, the BLM, U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, and five Tribes entered into a cooperative agreement to ensure that Tribal expertise and traditional perspectives remain at the forefront of decision-making for the Bears Ears National Monument in Utah. With enduring partnerships, we can ensure that these living landscapes continue to inform our nation's deeper understanding of the land and its history.

### **Conclusion**

The BLM is committed to managing America's public lands in a balanced, science-based manner. It is incumbent on us as stewards of our public lands to ensure their use is sustainable and beneficial to current and future generations of Americans, regardless of who they are or where they live, and we take that responsibility seriously. I look forward to working with the Committee on our shared natural resource, climate, and economic goals. Thank you for the opportunity testify here today.