



For Immediate Release

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Ranchers Warn US Forest Policies Threaten Livestock Grazing

WASHINGTON (Nov. 15, 2011) – On behalf of the [Public Lands Council](#) (PLC) and the [American Sheep Industry Association](#) (ASI), Margaret Soulen Hinson told lawmakers during a hearing of the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands if the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s U.S. Forest Service’s proposed forest planning rule goes into effect, thousands of ranching families could be forced off the land. While Soulen Hinson, an Idaho cattle and sheep producer and president of ASI, discussed multiple concerns PLC and ASI have with the proposed planning rule, which could be finalized this winter, she spent the bulk of her testimony detailing the negative effect a provision calling for management for “species viability” would have on federal lands ranching.

“By 2013, my family and I will be forced to remove 60 percent of our sheep from our allotments on the Payette National Forest, which may well mark the end of our family’s 80-year-old sheep operation altogether,” Soulen Hinson said. “This has come to pass because of a very specific wildlife provision of the current planning rule, which calls for management for ‘species viability.’ The term ‘viability’ is a vague, ill-defined term which appears nowhere in statute and has been the source of endless litigation and economic destruction over the years. We recommend the Forest Service remove entirely the term ‘viability’ and leave wildlife management to the states, as required by statute.”

According to Soulen Hinson, while the Forest Service claims the viability provision in the proposed rule is an improvement because it only applies to populations of “species of conservation concern,” there is no science-based definition for “species of conservation concern,” which could result in a limitless list of species to manage. Notably, she said the viability provision goes beyond the current vertebrate standard and applies to all types of species, even moss and fungus. She said the most important fact for lawmakers to realize is that under the National Forest Management Act and the Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act, the Forest Service does not have statutory authority to manage for species viability.

Subcommittee Chairman Rob Bishop (R-Utah) agrees that the proposed planning rule could have devastating impacts on the federal lands grazing industry.

“I remain concerned that the U.S. Forest Service’s proposed planning rule will have a devastating impact on access within our nation’s 155 national forests and 20 grasslands, especially for ranchers who utilize these areas for grazing. Secondly, I am very interested in addressing rising concerns that the Forest Service is attempting to leverage access to public lands in exchange for privately held water rights,” Bishop added, addressing another topic raised in the hearing regarding the Forest Service’s policy on water rights and permitted activities. “It is my hope that these concerns can be brought to light and put to rest with final resolution. Privately-held water rights should not be a factor associated with the permitting process.”

Citing growing demands by the U.S. Forest Service to amass water rights in the west in return for permitted activities such as range improvement maintenance, Demar Dahl, a Nevada Cattle rancher and member of the [National Cattlemen’s Beef Association](#) and PLC, testified on the policy’s potential impact on the ranching industry. He said the policy threatens the continuation of activities such as grazing that have existed on national forests for over a century—predating the agency’s existence.

“The Forest Service’s demand flies in the face of federalism and the prior appropriation doctrine for water rights which exists in much of the west,” Dahl said. “For the benefit of the resource, which ranchers are striving every day to improve, and which the Forest Service is mandated to care for, the current Forest Service policy of delaying maintenance and establishment of stockwater resources [in return for water rights] needs to be reevaluated and discarded.”