

Federal Lands Interim Committee

October 28, 2013

Chairman Denney, Chairman Winder, members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify about the management of federal lands in the state of Idaho.

My name is Ric Branch. I am a fifth generation Idahoan and my family has been ranching in Washington and Adams County since 1890. I am currently a member of the Idaho State Grazing Board Central Committee which is made up of members of the Boise, Burley, Idaho Falls, Salmon and Shoshone grazing Districts. These grazing districts were created by the Idaho Legislature under the provisions of the Taylor grazing Act on January 1, 1994 after Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt removed the word "Advisory" from the District and State Grazing Boards. He then created Resource Advisory Councils as a part of Rangeland Reform, of which I served on as a State Senator representing elected officials. The grazing advisory boards with the BLM now were referred to as State and District grazing boards, a blatant attempt to move local control of grazing fees from counties to federal bureaucracies. BLM grazing fees are distributed

thru a formula of 37 and one half percent directly deposited to the United States Treasury, 50% to the BLM district termed 8100 funds, and 12 and one half percent back to each counties treasurer. The county treasurer as an ex-officio grazing district treasurer pays out this money in this fund upon warrant of the grazing district in whole or in part in his county. All moneys paid to a county not within a grazing district are deposited in a fund known as the "Range Improvement Fund" and is used by the County Commissioners for predatory animal control, rodent control, poisonous or noxious weed extermination or for any similar purpose.

This model would serve the state well if public lands were transferred to the state. The 12 and one half percent from grazing fees is deposited in a fund known as 7121 money. This money is allocated by the local grazing boards for projects on the ground to improve range conditions for livestock and wildlife. The grazing advisory boards also historically advised BLM managers on the use of their 8100 funds.

I would like to take a minute to review what the intent of the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 meant . The purpose of

this act was to improve range conditions, provide for their orderly use, development and to stabilize the livestock industry. The Taylor Grazing Act effectively closed the rangelands to homesteading in the Dakotas and western states. The Act established grazing districts on the vacant, unappropriated and unreserved lands of the public domain. It also established grazing advisory boards. Board duties included the allocation of permits, determination of boundaries, seasons of use, and the carrying capacity of the range. A new permit system granted grazing privileges by preference to ranchers who had actually used a grazing district's land before 1934. These were owners of land who could support livestock on base ranches during seasons when herds were not on the the grazing districts. These permits are a unique form of ownership, constituting a property right of the utmost importance. This value property interest is a grazing preference requiring base property. The Federal Lands Policy and Management Act of 1976 and the Public Rangelands Act of 1978 have superceded the Taylor Grazing Act. Incidentally, Clarence Craig, Sen. Craig's grandfather, traveled to Washington, D.C. to help write the Taylor Grazing Bill in 1934.

Many of us here in Idaho are concerned about the dysfunction of our federal government and its agencies. Roads are being obliterated on our National Forests denying access to recreationists, hunters and multiple use industries. In the Owyhees the operators cannot use rangeland improvements to help meet standards and guidelines on the ground. Instead AUM's are being cut causing irreparable damage to families and communities. The excuse is that they can't improve range conditions while litigation is ongoing. Rules, regulations, and litigation are eating up the budgets of our federal agencies with the results being less money is going on the ground for improvements. As a result renewable resources are put off limits to citizens of communities and county and state governments. Service economies do not generate new wealth and the people of Idaho suffer the consequences.

I believe that a model can be developed for management or ownership of the public lands in the state of Idaho. This model would uphold the integrity of value property interests of individuals while assuring multiple use by citizens and other natural resource industries. I envision

a management model independent of the Land Board and its endowments, much more efficient in achieving rangeland health by more effective use of budgetary funds on the ground to meet the goals of good land stewardship. We value the sustainable renewable resources that make Idaho such a great state with unlimited potential for its people, economy and recreational opportunities. The government closest to the people governs best and so it is with the stewardship of our public lands. Local people closest to the land are the most efficient way to ensure attainment of land use integrity goals. Many of our stakeholders have hundreds of thousands of dollars invested in water pipelines and developments that create on the ground improvements for livestock and wildlife.

I wholeheartedly endorse the State of Idaho searching for a better way to ensure that our public lands have management more beneficial to its citizens and resources. This can be done with a much smaller workforce and overhead now borne by our federal government.

Unfortunately judges are going full speed ahead to deny access to our public lands and resources and be damned what the actual science says. They refuse to consider predators as a factor in the decline of sage grouse populations. Expensive exclosures around streams that do not run year round are required in many areas of Idaho. A common sense approach is needed in these areas and I believe that the state could provide that management.

Fire suppression is another concern and I believe there are more efficient and effective economical ways to fight fire in Idaho. A lot of money is spent in getting camps set up and equipment and personnel on location while fires get out of control that should have been suppressed earlier.

As I said earlier the government that governs closest to the people , governs best and I applaud this committee for investing the time and money to consider different management for public lands in the state of Idaho.

Again, I would like to thank you for allowing you to testify before this committee.