

**Written Statement of Stephanie Garcia Richard,
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**U.S. House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations**

**Hearing on the Bureau of Land Management's Proposed Rule
to Advance Conservation and Landscape Health**

May 24, 2023

Good morning, Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Stansbury, and distinguished subcommittee members. Thank you for the opportunity to join you today and express my support for BLM's efforts to better incorporate conservation and landscape health in its management of our Nation's public lands.

I am a native New Mexican born on the vast eastern plains of our state and raised in the beautiful Gila Wilderness area located in the southwestern part of New Mexico. I have family that raised cattle both on those eastern plains and in the northern mountains; and most of the public land I manage has more cows on it than people.

I have the great honor of serving as the Commissioner of Public Lands for the State of New Mexico. With about 13 million acres under the management of the State Land Office, and a responsibility to steward our lands for current and future generations, we work every day to ensure our land management practices are sound and reflective of conservation science.

There's a lot in the proposed rule that we could discuss today, but I wanted to focus my remarks on what this means for New Mexico from a land management perspective.

First, the rule recognizes the fundamental reality that our public lands are fragmented, and our ability to create resilient and healthy ecosystems requires a landscape level approach.

In my home state of New Mexico, federal, state, Tribal and private lands are all extensively checkerboarded. We need to look for ways to maintain intact landscapes and prioritize the protection of habitat and other natural resources that our ecosystems rely on.

Second, the rule clarifies that conservation is a "use" on par with other types of land practices. This effort is consistent with the approach we are taking in New Mexico.

The mission of the New Mexico State Land Office is somewhat different than BLM's in that our primary mandate is to earn money for education from leasing lands, but there is also a lot of similarity with BLM's "multiple use" framework.

We have recreational users, agricultural lessees, extractive industries, renewable energy projects, and pretty much any other land use you can imagine. And from those leases we're on track to earn a record \$3 billion this year.

And our ability to continue to generate money for education is directly tied to the health and the productivity of state lands. Conservation leasing must be part of a balanced portfolio of uses as we work to ensure the health and resiliency of our public lands for current and future generations.

I would also like to emphasize that this rule isn't about "taking public lands away." It is about explicitly allowing another type of use, which can often occur along side other lands uses. There may be times where various uses are incompatible, but there are also going to be many instances where there are not any conflicts.

Lastly, the rule recognizes the importance of making sound management decisions based on science and incorporating Indigenous Knowledge shared by Tribal communities. The pressing challenges of climate change cannot be understated. We need more resilient lands and ecosystems. And to get there, we should learn from our traditional and Tribal communities.

Let me be clear, the proposed rule isn't perfect. For example, state agencies and local governments are not able to hold conservation leases. Landscape connectivity could be enhanced if the option to lease for conservation purposes is made available to all state and local partners.

Additionally, the rule shouldn't just prioritize ACEC land acquisitions. There are non-conveyance means, such as leasing and collaborative management, that could also accomplish the objective of protecting these resources on a landscape level. Working with private, Tribal, state and local partners is often easier, less costly, and at times, could be more effective than land acquisitions in expanding the reach of conservation efforts and ultimately protecting more resources.

But overall, this rule is a significant step forward in improving how we manage our public lands. It would be good for New Mexico, and a positive step in modernizing our Nation's approach to public land management. And I look forward to working through the rulemaking process with BLM regarding my concerns and suggestions.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.