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Congressional Testimony from

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Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests and Mining

Chairman Lee, members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the invitation to testify before this committee about Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative.

As an employee of the Utah Department of Natural Resources, I currently serve as the Director of Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI). Before accepting this position in January 2017, I spent three years as a restoration biologist in southern Utah and more than a decade as the funding and operations coordinator for the Initiative.

WRI is one of the West's unique success stories. It ensures that federal, state and local partners can work together across boundaries — with unmatched speed and efficiency — to improve large landscapes. Utah's WRI focuses on improving three key things:

- Watershed health and biological diversity
- Water quality and yield
- Opportunities for sustainable uses of natural resources

Now entering its 12th year, the WRI partnership has completed more than 1,600 projects and restored more than 1.3 million acres of watersheds on federal, state and private lands in Utah. The cost of this work now exceeds \$160 million. More than 500 unique funding sources have been used to help fund WRI projects over the years. Most of that funding comes from federal and state sources, including, on average, more than \$5 million annually from the State of Utah, over \$7 million annually from Federal sources and nearly \$2 million annually from sportsmen's groups.

Like many successful programs before it, WRI developed out of crisis. In the early 2000s, Utah was in the midst of a long-term drought. Across the state, Sagebrush ecosystems were in decline as pinyon and juniper trees continued to crowd out understory forage plants

necessary for both wildlife and livestock. Aspen was in decline and invasive species, such as cheatgrass, were beginning to dominate large landscapes after more frequent, widespread wildfires.

To address the crisis, leadership from federal and state land-management agencies met with other natural-resource-oriented agencies and organizations from across the state. In 2005, this group formalized the WRI partnership by drafting a charter that outlined future cooperation and leadership in addressing major natural resource threats at a watershed scale.

Utah's WRI has organized itself as a bottom-up initiative with five independent regional teams. These teams consist of regional resource professionals from federal, state and local agencies as well as sportsmen's groups, environmental organizations, private landowners and other natural-resource-oriented groups. These regional teams identify where restoration projects are needed and what needs to be done. The teams annually rank their project proposals with guidance from WRI administration, which then match the proposals — in ranked order — to appropriate and willing funding sources, until funds are exhausted. The regional teams then help each other implement large-scale restoration projects across ownership boundaries.

For Utah's damaged landscapes, WRI is making a huge difference. Burned areas are swiftly being reseeded with plants beneficial to wildlife and livestock. Stream and riparian restoration has improved water flows and quality. Sagebrush and Aspen ecosystems are being restored, benefiting hundreds of species that rely on them for food and shelter. Sage grouse and other at-risk wildlife species are holding steady or increasing in numbers and Utah's sportsman are enjoying healthier and more abundant game statewide.

Today, I'd like to highlight a few of the most important strategies that have helped WRI to be successful over the last 12 years:

First: Utah's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has taken on the major organizing role in WRI. Through federal authorities (such as the Wyden Amendment and the Good Neighbor Authority), federal agencies have developed assistance agreements with DNR. Those agreements send federal funds to be pooled with other state and non-government resources. This allows WRI to fund and complete restoration work across ownership boundaries on a larger scale, at a much quicker pace and for a fraction of the cost. Over the life of the Initiative, DNR has routed more than \$44 million dollars in federal funds through WRI, without taking a dime in overhead.

Second: The state government system of awarding competitive contracts is much more efficient than the federal system. This allows WRI to quickly implement restoration projects and wildfire rehabilitation by swiftly purchasing seed, completing cultural resource surveys and hiring contractors to complete the work.

Third: WRI encourages regional teams to complete large-scale, cross-boundary, programmatic NEPA work. To advance this effort, WRI has developed a special funding source to help federal

agencies complete the NEPA process in areas where restoration is desperately needed but, due to other priorities, federal land management agencies may not have the time or staff to dedicate to the analysis. WRI-NEPA funds are made available to fund overtime hours for current federal employees or to hire outside contractors to help complete critical NEPA work.

Fourth: Utah uses the existing WRI partnership to complete restoration, on an emergency basis, following wildfire. Federal programs such as BLM's Emergency Stabilization and the USFS' Burned Area Emergency Response typically focus on stabilization of soils to minimize runoff and sediment flows following burns. WRI partners supplement these federal efforts with additional seed and funding to turn these stabilization efforts into a more complete restoration of watershed health and to extend restoration onto adjacent burned state and private lands. This helps benefits wildlife habitat, water quality and quantity, livestock forage, and reduces the risk of future catastrophic fires. Fire rehabilitation in Utah is now completed across ownership boundaries and at a large scale.

In summary, WRI tackles landscape scale challenges with a powerful, effective partnership. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to your questions.

For more information on Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative,

Please visit our website:

watershed.utah.gov