

OPENING STATEMENT
Sen. Mike Lee
Chairman of the Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests and Mining
June 21, 2017

Millions of acres of watersheds and critical landscapes across the country are deteriorating. Invasive species, catastrophic wildfires, and inadequate management have badly damaged these lands and continue to threaten their health. These problems are not exclusive to federal lands – many state and private lands face similar threats.

Healthy watersheds are essential to our environment, our economy, and our wellbeing. They support everything from water quality and wildlife habitat to livestock grazing, timber harvesting, and recreation.

We must find innovative ways to restore these lands to ensure they can support these vital functions in the future.

The haphazard way these lands are managed has proved to be one of the biggest obstacles to restoring them. Too often, federal, state, and private lands are managed independently of each other, with little to no coordination between neighboring land managers.

This patchwork of management strategies breeds confusion and distrust, with bad outcomes for the land.

Thankfully, that's not the end of the story. In some parts of the country, land managers have cooperated with one another to solve these problems. The results are promising.

One solution they have come up with is “collaborative initiatives.” These initiatives bring together federal, state, and tribal land managers, as well as private land owners, to cooperate on landscape restoration projects across ownership boundaries.

A good example of such an initiative can be found in Utah.

In response to the deteriorating condition of watersheds on public and private lands, federal and state officials came together and formed the Watershed Restoration Initiative, or WRI.

For over 12 years, the WRI has brought federal, state, and private stakeholders together to resolve some of the state's most vexing land management issues and restore essential watersheds.

To date, WRI has completed more than 1,600 projects and restored more than 1.3 million acres of land. Another 287 projects spanning 280,000 acres are currently underway.

Like so much else in politics, WRI is successful because it relies on locally driven, bottom-up solutions. WRI's organizational structure empowers regional teams, not far-off bureaucracy, to identify and prioritize projects.

Collaborative initiatives are true state-based solutions to the problems we face. When we let states take the lead, we avoid the partisan bickering and red tape that can bog down projects by the federal government.

Today we will hear about collaborative initiatives that are transforming land management across the West. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, who play important roles in these successful initiatives.