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TESTIMONY OF BOB ABBEY  
NEVADA STATE DIRECTOR  
U.S. BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
BEFORE THE  
SENATE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

MARCH 31, 2003

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. For the record, my name is Bob Abbey and I am the Nevada State Director for the Bureau of Land Management. Thank you for the opportunity to come and testify before you today on SB76. As I understand it, this bill would revise the provision governing the acquisition of water rights on public grazing lands for the purpose of watering livestock.

During the interim, the permanent committee on public lands worked on this issue to develop a bill that would address the ruling of the Nevada Supreme Court and I applaud them for their effort and hard work. For the record, the BLM supports the bill as introduced.

As you may know Mr. Chairman, the BLM holds individual water rights as well as joint water rights in Nevada. These rights were adjudicated by the State Engineer according to Nevada State water law at that time.

SB76 will allow the BLM to continue to jointly apply for water rights, which is the best option and provides the greatest flexibility for long-term management of the public rangelands. BLM manages the public lands in Nevada for the many uses, including livestock, wildlife habitat and wild horses. To properly carry out this responsibility, we need an interest in the water on the public lands.

As we all know, livestock gathers where there is water. This bill is important because it allows the BLM and producers to work in partnership to develop water sources away from streams. Dispersing grazing across the range make better use of the available forage, and relieves pressure from streambeds to allow riparian areas to function properly.

The Bureau is in the process of revising its federal grazing regulations in order to promote more effective partnerships with grazing permittees and all who care about public rangeland. Four national scoping meetings have been held, including one in Reno earlier this month, to hear concerns and suggestions. A couple of changes being considered are (1) to reinstate an earlier provision that allows the BLM and a grazing permittee to share title of certain range improvements, including water developments, and (2) to clarify that the BLM will follow state water law.

A companion initiative to the rule change proposal is a policy initiative that aims to improve management flexibility, so that we can work with livestock operators and other interests to try some innovative approaches to improve the public rangelands. We have scheduled a public workshop in Winnemucca on Thursday, April 24 to discuss the policy concepts envisioned and hear what people think about them.

The BLM is committed to working in partnership with all users, including livestock producers, to manage the public rangelands. We have many success stories across the state that illustrate the good work that results from these partnerships. The BLM, in partnership with the livestock producers, can work together to develop the necessary water sources benefit the public rangelands.

SB76, by permitting joint filings, will help accomplish these goals.

Thank you again Mr. Chairman for holding this hearing and giving me the opportunity to provide testimony today. I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.