

Statement of
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Rolling Stone Ranch and The Blackfoot Challenge

Before the
U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
at the hearing on:

"Locally Grown: Creating Rural Jobs with America's Public Lands"

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Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Mr. Bishop, and Members of the Subcommittee. It is my sincere pleasure to offer this testimony, and I thank you for this wonderful opportunity.

I am a native Montanan that graduated from Montana State University in 1983, and took over my family's ranch in Ovando in 1984. I make my living with cattle, yet attempt to make a difference in the world by tending to my family, my community, and the wonderful landscapes that I call home. I try to benefit my rural community by serving on the local fire department, school board, and county planning board of adjustments, Powell county Weed Board, Future Fisheries Commission, and several other volunteer efforts. One of the volunteer efforts that consume considerable time, yet delivers fulfilling rewards is my participation on the Blackfoot Challenge Board of Directors.

Context

The Blackfoot River headwaters atop the Continental Divide at Roger's Pass and flows 132 miles westerly to its confluence with the Clark Fork River near Missoula. Nestled between the stunning mountain ranges of the Continental Divide, the Bob Marshall/Scapegoat Wilderness Area, and Garnet Mountains, the Blackfoot River Watershed totals about 1.5 million acres. Land ownership in the watershed is 49% Federal, 5% State of Montana, 24% private and until very recently 20% was held by Plum Creek Timber Company. As a community we worked together to acquire Plum Creek lands which were slated for real estate development. Now our landscape is 69% federally managed. In general, public lands and significant portions of Plum Creek Timber Company land comprise the forested, mountain areas while private lands are located in the foothills and lower valley floor.

We have significant portions of our landscape that are designated wilderness adjacent to what we thinking of as our working landscape. This working landscape comprised of federal and private lands shapes and drives the economy of our community. Powell counties unemployment rate in 2009 was just over 8% and in 2008 over 17% of the residents in our community lived below the poverty line. Most of the people who live in our region are here because they love making a living taking care of the forests and rangelands we call home. Maintaining the livelihoods of the people who live here are the key to protecting the conservation values that are so important to

our community and the American people. So, it is important to remember that this is not just about creating ‘a job’ but also about protecting a lifestyle that will support maintaining and increasing conservation values.

I have been a member of the Blackfoot Challenge from the beginning and currently serve as its Board Chairman. The Blackfoot Challenge story began in the early 1970s when landowners began amassing community support for conservation and sharing resources along the Blackfoot River in western Montana. We formed the Blackfoot Challenge in 1993 to conserve and enhance the natural resources and rural way of life in the 1.5 million-acre Blackfoot Watershed of western Montana. The Challenge is a partnership of private landowners, agencies, communities, land trusts and conservation groups. Together, we have placed 110,000 acres under conservation easement, conserved 89,000 acres of corporate timber lands, shared lessons learned with thousands, treated forests for safety and health, coordinate the shared drought response, organized a multi-county weed program, and reduced human-grizzly bear conflicts. While we have conserved these important natural resources we have also been able to help retain 200 ranches that represent 40 percent of the working lands in the Blackfoot Watershed. Today, the Blackfoot Challenge is widely touted as a national model for landscape-scale conservation, in large thanks to the many landowners, corporations, and the state, federal, local and non-governmental employees who all put aside their differences to focus on the resources and long-term economic and social health of our community.

Our approach is to provide regular communication between landowners and partners in support of natural resource stewardship through private and public cooperation. Our volunteer, eighteen-member Board of private landowners, federal and state land managers, local government officials and corporate landowners direct us. All have a stake in the watershed and share a common vision that we can achieve success by building trust, partnerships, and working together.

Our committees follow a consensus-based model, working with all watershed partners and stakeholders to coordinate partnerships and resources. Through this cooperative approach we find where roughly 80 percent agree and work through the appropriate Board-led committee to implement programs and projects

Here are some highlights of our accomplishments:

- **Weeds Managed** -- Over 380 landowners utilizing integrated weed management practices on over 45,000 acres of noxious weeds since 1997. GIS weed mapping on 474,727 acres with 34% under active weed and grazing management.
- **Large Landscapes Kept Intact** -- 110,000 acres of private lands under perpetual conservation easements.
- **Streams Restored** -- 39 tributaries including 38 miles of instream restoration and 62 miles of riparian restoration.
- **Habitat Improved** -- 2,600 acres of wetlands and 2,300 acres of native grasslands restored.

- **Water Conserved** -- Over 75 key irrigators & recreational outfitters participating voluntarily in emergency drought response efforts.
- **Fisheries Improved** -- Over 460 miles of fish passage barrier removal and 13 self-cleaning fish screens installed on irrigation ditches.
- **Community Shaping Its Future** -- Community-driven plan directing the resale of 89,000 acres of corporate timber lands.
- **Human-Wildlife Conflicts Reduced** -- 93 landowners participating with over 200 carcasses removed, 14,000 linear feet of electrified predator-friendly fencing, 60% of the apiary yards fenced, and 80 bear-resistant dumpsters in the watershed.
- **Schools Involved** -- Teachers and students from all schools in the Blackfoot are engaged in watershed education.
- **Community Engaged and Networked** -- At least 500 people involved in Blackfoot committees, education outreach, and tours.
- **Challenge Webpage and Newspaper Articles** reach 2,759 households in Blackfoot and over 60 partners.
- **Lewis' Return Trail** -- Mapped and accessible through the Blackfoot, with three gateway kiosks.

We particularly want to highlight the tremendous success we have had with our federal partners through a variety of agreements – cooperation, contribution and participation – depending on the appropriate agency program, for stewardship of the Blackfoot Watershed. Many of these tools also provide significant employment in the area, whether it is government, non-profit, private contractors carrying out restoration activity, or indirectly through improved operating conditions for the private, natural resource-based operations, particularly ranching, that form the bedrock of our local economy and sense of community. These agreements provide a critical source of project funding, and often provide that critical and difficult to find operating funding for staff to leverage project funding with private and public cooperation.

Specific examples include:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, Contribution Agreement – This long-standing contribution agreement has provided the Blackfoot Challenge with \$400,000 in project and program capacity since 2006. This funding has not only supported the administration and program capacity of the Blackfoot Challenge, but has provided project and program capacity for other watershed partners including the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, Northwest Connections and Swan Ecosystem Center.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) – Contribution Agreement – Since 2006, this CA has supported a Land Steward through the North Powell Conservation District with \$103,000 and facilitated 22 Environmental Quality Incentive Program contracts that enhanced

23,000 acres of private land. The Blackfoot Challenge and NRCS have a common purpose of helping to bring about the conservation and wise use of land, water, wildlife and related resources in the ecologically rich and agriculturally important Blackfoot Watershed through delivery of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). EQIP has the potential to dramatically assist private landowners in improving rangeland and forest health, water quality, fisheries, and wildlife habitat.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) – Community Assistance Program – Since the early years of the Blackfoot Challenge, BLM programs have provided critical support for weed management and lately for fire management on private lands. To date \$127,900 has been provided to assist private landowners with treatment of fuel reduction and an assessment of priority fuel loading in the Blackfoot Watershed.

U.S. Forest Service (USFS) – Participating Agreement and Weed Agreements – Working cross boundary for an “all lands” approach following the Blackfoot Challenge model of working with public and private land ownerships, the USFS has provided significant funding to assist private landowners participation with public land managers in treating high priority acres of noxious weeds. Recently, and in anticipation of future opportunities in across the Lincoln and Seeley Lake Ranger Districts, as well as in partnership with the Swan Ranger District, the Blackfoot Challenge signed a Master Participation Agreement to increase awareness of and take action on the wide variety of collaborative efforts. The partners are committed to utilizing this Master Agreement to maintain and enhance their ongoing partnership activities as well to explore new opportunities. Ongoing activities include, but are not limited to: coldwater fisheries habitat conservation and enhancement; grizzly bear and lynx habitat restoration and conservation; vegetative manipulation to mitigate, restore, or enhance native vegetation communities and assemblages; maintaining access and information for recreation on public lands, monitor projects and baseline habitat conditions at site-specific and landscape scales.

Our place is important to residents and visitors alike – a source of livelihood, recreation and a link between the Northern boreal forests and the Southern Rockies. As word of our approach gets around, people come to hear our story, meet our partners and visit the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area where a 15-member citizen council cooperatively manages 41,000 acres of public and private land. This builds relationships that benefit our watershed and transfers the value of community-based conservation to a broader community.

We are taking the success and lessons learned in the Blackfoot Watershed and expanding our ideas and effort well beyond the borders of Montana. Consequently, we are moving forward with a large group of ranchers from across the west and mid-west to create an organization called, *Partners for Conservation* (PFC). PFC is a private landowner organization with a primary goal of advancing solutions that will support collaboration around working landscapes to benefit present and future generations. PFC aims to represent the private landowners and partners that are practicing innovative, measurable and effective conservation practices on the ground for the long-term health and productivity of working landscapes and rural communities and natural resource economies across the United States. Current representatives include landowners from California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming.

Blackfoot Challenge's Strategies Are:

- ***Keep working landscapes intact*** for the next generation of land stewards—with biological, social and economic indicators of success.
- ***Promote public and private partnerships*** through building trust and relationships between private landowners and managers, public agencies, non-profit conservation groups, foundations, corporations, policymakers, and academic institutions for the benefit of working landscapes across the country.
- ***Support voluntary, incentive-based programs*** that are flexible, predictable, emphasize the value of people and partnership, and have measurable outcomes.
- ***Transfer experiences, expertise and lessons learned*** about cooperative conservation and holistic land management tools, funding, and technical resources.
- ***Increase and leverage funding*** for efforts that promote cooperative conservation.
- ***Support local, watershed and/or place-based conservation*** efforts by providing an umbrella group to effect change at the regional and national conservation scale.
- ***Promote the 80-20 rule for conservation***: Work on the 80% held in common, instead of the 20% that divides.

Blackfoot Challenge's Recommendations Are:

1. Increase the use, flexibility and funding for programs that will allow private lands to remain part of a working landscape. Programs such as Forest Legacy and the Land and Water Conservation Fund are good examples.
2. Ensure that the federal land management agencies have the resources they need to plan and implement so we can maintain conservation values across the whole landscape. The recently established Community Forest Landscape Restoration Program, authorized by the Forest Landscape Restoration Act is an important step in this direction.
3. Encourage the land management and regulatory agencies to work together and in collaboration with citizen groups to achieve their missions. Congress should ask these agencies to report on their collaboration success and should reward them for their successes.
4. Support the programs and staff within the Natural Resource Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service that provide technical assistance to private landowners and communities.
5. Create a grant program that would support organizations working on collaborative conservation to transfer knowledge, provide training and share new tools for conservation,

and support collaborative conservation efforts; currently there are no federal programs that invest the partnership work we do advance this strategy.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I hope you found my testimony insightful, beneficial, and helpful in your efforts to serve the people and resources of the United States. This concludes my statement and it would be my pleasure to respond to your questions.

Thank you!