

March 28, 2014

The Honorable Sally Jewell
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Jewell:

As conservation scientists, we are deeply concerned about one of the most important responsibilities of your new job: the management of federal public lands. Decisions you make in the next few years will be crucial to the long-term health of those lands in the western United States where half of the lands managed by the Department of Interior are located.

We would like to draw your attention to the urgent need to manage a significantly greater percentage of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands for conservation. BLM's domain hosts a broad range of habitat types that are vitally important for biodiversity, including grasslands, deserts, wetlands, forests, mountains, and others that harbor a wealth of plant and animal species.

Yet only about 11 percent of BLM lands nationwide are permanently safeguarded from development and are part of the National Landscape Conservation System. By comparison, the U.S. Forest Service, the nation's other multiple use land management agency, currently manages almost half of its lands for conservation through the roadless rule or as wilderness. We believe it is reasonable to remedy this lack of balance on BLM lands through responsible conservation policy initiatives.

This is a timely concern, as our public lands face increasingly complex and widespread environmental challenges. The long-term biological integrity of these indispensable lands is threatened by record-setting energy development, off-road vehicle use, which has become one of the fastest growing categories of outdoor activities, a potential return to unsustainable logging of old forests, and climate change, which is already forcing the agency to consider new management approaches.

Looking at this picture more broadly, over the past 50 years humans have changed ecosystems more rapidly and extensively than in any comparable period in human history. This has resulted in a substantial and largely irreversible loss in the Earth's biodiversity. In the United States alone, almost 6,000 acres of natural areas are converted to developed uses every day. When we lose these areas, we lose many of the valuable services that natural landscapes provide, including clean air and water, flood control, recreation opportunities, and wildlife habitat, among others.

Scientific studies and reviews indicate that to conserve biodiversity and halt or reverse ecosystem degradation, at least one fourth, and up to three-fourths, of a typical region must be managed with conservation of nature as a primary objective. Today, approximately 15 percent of the total acreage of the 11 western contiguous U.S. is in some form of protected status, well shy of a scientifically defensible 25 percent minimum conservation target. Because half of the public land in the American West is under BLM's jurisdiction, our nation's success in conserving biodiversity and ecological function in this region is inextricably linked to BLM's ability to bring a responsible balance to management to these lands.

The agency has taken an excellent first step in launching its ecoregional data compilations (the Rapid Ecoregional Assessments or REAs) that are intended to inform BLM's decisions, consistent with department policy to "use the best available science." Additionally, the Department's recently adopted Climate Change Adaptation policy requires agencies of the Department of Interior to "protect and restore

core, unfragmented habitat areas, and the key habitat linkages among them” and “focus development activities in ecologically disturbed areas when possible, and avoid ecologically sensitive landscapes, culturally sensitive areas, and crucial wildlife corridors.”

In order for these science-based departmental initiatives to be successful, the agency must set conservation outcome-based targets that include numerical goals for protected acreage. Executed through individual BLM plans, protected acreage goals will significantly increase conservation on BLM lands across the contiguous western states, thus helping to maintain biodiversity and ecosystem services on those lands.

BLM is poised to play a major role in the effort to forestall irreversible declines and loss of ecological function across the West. We urge you to ensure that BLM takes its proper place as a conservation steward of our public domain, by implementing a planning system based on conservation outcomes that significantly increase the amount of protected land managed by BLM.

Sincerely,

Vanguard signers listed below; a full list of signers is attached. Affiliations listed for identification purposes only.

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