

Wyoming Outdoor Council

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July 13, 2020

The Honorable John Barrasso
United States Senate
307 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Barrasso,

The Wyoming Outdoor Council is our state's oldest, home-grown, independent conservation organization. We strive to work with the public and diverse Wyoming stakeholders to find workable solutions to our state's environmental challenges. We write today regarding your draft legislation representing the proposals from the Wyoming County Commissioners Association's Wyoming Public Lands Initiative. Thank you for your leadership in this, and for the many meetings and consultations we've had with your staff over the years regarding this process. Unfortunately, the Outdoor Council cannot support this bill. Overall, the draft legislation has failed to build and represent a broad consensus of Wyoming constituent support, and without this, we see little hope for passage in Congress.

We do not come to this conclusion lightly. For over 3 years, and more than any other conservation group in the state, the Wyoming Outdoor Council invested significant staff time and resources engaging in the WPLI process in good faith. Specifically, we fielded 4 staff to attend all the county meetings across the state, rallied public engagement, hosted training for other conservation groups and provided significant financial resources to support the effort: funding for the counties' professional facilitation costs and for the University of Wyoming's creation and deployment of the resource mapping tool currently hosted on the WCCA's website. We approached the WPLI process with a belief in, and commitment to, the public lands values of Wyoming people.

Regrettably, the WPLI process was flawed due to a range of reasons, including lack of leadership, focused support, broad public engagement and a balanced approach. Some committees' approaches became polarizing and were not places where every day Wyoming citizens' views were well represented, nor even welcomed. Some process decisions seemed arbitrary, inconsistent and without consideration of options for compromise. Throughout our 3+ years of work in this process, we regularly updated your staff on these concerns and also kept the WCCA and Governor's Office similarly apprised. We'd be glad to review these concerns in further detail with your current staff. In our many years of work in Wyoming, and from our experience working with you on the Wyoming Range Legacy Act, we have learned that crafting public lands solutions means that Wyoming citizens must have a personal stake in and support for the management solutions on the table.

Your leadership in public lands issues in Wyoming continues to be vital. We believe that WPLI offers many lessons about what it takes to build this broad public support. As we reflect back on the process, we suggest it is helpful to focus on possibly just one landscape, and do the job well there, to build Wyoming success and capacity. Starting where there is already significant and broad public investment and with the option for a diversity of management tools and incentives to meet stakeholder values, can be critical. We are glad to sit down with your staff and provide more of our thoughts about this.

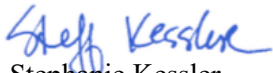
One specific point, however, that we would like to highlight from the WPLI process is in regards to Native American consultation. Tribal perspectives were not incorporated into the process although a vast majority of these public lands are Indigenous cultural lands. WSAs, in particular, because they are generally protected from surface-disturbing activities, potentially contain a high number of important heritage artifacts and sites of cultural importance. This absence of engagement was perhaps most egregious in Fremont County, where not only did commissioners decline to add a tribal representative to their committee, but did not follow through on their commitment to consult with both tribes on their recommendations. The Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho Tribes have vital perspectives to offer on public lands, and consulting with tribal governments and citizens should be a regular and central part of any public lands process.

Of note, however, of the counties represented in this draft bill, we found that Carbon County provided an excellent model for how to do this kind of work well. We have only the highest praise for the Carbon County Commission, and for this diverse and truly engaged committee. Committee members went above and beyond to have hard conversations and create recommendations that found common ground among many diverse interests.

It is in that spirit that we express our hope that you will lay this bill aside and take stock of the many lessons learned during WPLI. Our state is blessed to have a diversity of rugged, awe-inspiring, and much-beloved public lands within our borders. These lands are our future, and if stewarded well, can be a source of sustainability for our state's health and heritage. We believe that there is much work that we can do together.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments and please feel free to reach out if we can provide further insights and assistance.

Sincerely,



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Cc:
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