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December 3, 2014

The Honorable Sally Jewell
Secretary of the Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

Western Governors' Association
1600 Broadway, Suite 1700
Denver, CO 80210

Mike Boots
Acting Chair, White House CEQ
722 Jackson Pl. NW
Washington, DC 20506

Dan Ashe
Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

Neil Kornze
Director, Bureau of Land Management
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Jewell, Director Ashe, Director Kornze, Acting Chair Boots and members of the Western Governors Association:

We are writing to you as landowners and members of the Western Landowners Alliance who care deeply about our lands and the wildlife species that depend on them. The recent listing of the Gunnison sage grouse as threatened and the potential listing of the greater sage grouse are of great interest to us not just because of the potential impacts on our management and livelihoods, but because these species are facing possible extinction.

There are many of us all over the West working to conserve and restore sage steppe habitat. We wish to see the grouse populations recover and thrive. It isn't easy, the science isn't always clear and we have to make it work within our financial means and in conjunction with our livelihoods. However, our current system needs improvements to better support landowners in implementing conservation measures and being a proactive part of the solution.

Provisions such as Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs) are important to landowners. However, inadequate funding of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service means that the waiting time for CCAAs can be several years. In the meantime, landowners who do voluntarily improve habitat and increase grouse populations may face greater land use restrictions once a listing takes place. It can be a classic "No good deed goes unpunished" situation. We ask that you work with Congress to secure additional funding and staffing for the USFWS to better enable the agency to help landowners be part of the solution. We ask that states cooperate in CCAA development and that the conservation efforts coordinated by the National Resource Conservation Service and the Western

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies continue to be funded. If the species is listed as threatened under the ESA, an accommodating section 4(d) that recognized the importance of private land would be in order.

It's also important to us that state and federal agencies develop coordinated management plans and provide the time necessary for these plans to work. The inconsistency within and among agencies leads to confusion and inefficiency in recovery efforts. State and federal plans need to include real measures to minimize and mitigate impacts on public as well as private lands. This doesn't need to mean we can't graze, develop energy resources or recreate—it just means we need to do so with added care. Effective sage grouse conservation and recovery will likely require both voluntary and regulatory measures that allow strategies and practices to adapt as knowledge improves and conditions change. Those of us who have been involved with sage grouse conservation and recovery for a number of years can attest that it is possible to manage land in a way that sustains both livelihoods and the species.

To be successful, we need the cooperation of all stakeholders for a fast recovery and continued conservation. We need energy companies to do their part and we need greater collaborative engagement from environmental organizations. The Endangered Species Act (ESA) is intended to ensure the survival of species and the biodiversity and ecological health that ultimately supports human survival. However, conservation is a process, not an event or a listing decision. While regulatory measures can catalyze action in the short term, long-term outcomes will depend largely on the degree to which management strategies inspire and facilitate voluntary participation.

Because landowners steward some of the West's most biologically diverse landscapes and care for critical habitat to countless fish and wildlife species, we have a vital role to play in conservation and species recovery efforts. We embrace our responsibility and encourage other landowners to join us in taking proactive measures to ensure the survival and recovery of sage grouse populations. However, it will take all stakeholders working together in a more coordinated and collaborative manner to succeed.

We call on Congress and our state legislatures to provide the funding our agencies need to function and enable our participation. We call on state and federal agencies to develop effective and coordinated management plans. We call on our fellow ranchers and the energy industry to find proactive, pro-conservation strategies in which to do business. We call on environmental organizations to better support those who are doing their part. Above all, we call on our Western Governors and the Department of the Interior to provide the coordinated leadership we need to make this happen.

Sincerely,



Paul R. Vahldiek, Jr.
Chairman of the Board



Lesli Allison
Executive Director