

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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Opening Statement Ranking Member Stacey E. Plaskett

Hearing on “Preserving Opportunities for Grazing on Federal Land”

July 24, 2018

Chairman Gianforte, thank you for calling this hearing.

The federal government owns approximately 640 million acres of land in the United States. Most of that land is located in the western states, but not all of it. In my own district we have the beautifully preserved Virgin Islands National Park, which testifies to the important role the federal government plays in managing these lands for the enjoyment of all people of this great country.

Today we will hear from local ranchers as well as local producers who benefit from permits to graze livestock on federal lands.

Their viewpoint is important, but it is not the whole story. We will also hear the viewpoint of the Nez Perce tribe, whose members are throughout the Western United States in central Idaho, and parts of Washington, Oregon, and Montana.

Through his written testimony, Chairman Shannon Wheeler has brought to this Subcommittee’s attention some of the unintended consequences that come from grazing livestock on federal land: the decimation of the wild Bighorn sheep species.

Chairman Wheeler has stated in his written testimony that Bighorn sheep are culturally critical to the Nez Perce tribe. The Nez Perce tribe have hunted the Bighorn sheep to craft culturally significant items, like bighorn bows, and have used this wild sheep for food, and for clothing.

The Bighorn sheep are so significant to the tribe that the tribe’s cultural right to hunt and use the Bighorn sheep is protected by treaty.

The Bighorn sheep, and the Nez Perce tribe’s critical relationship with this important species, is an example of how federal government agencies must balance commercial interests with cultural and environmental interests and treaty obligations, when they manage federal lands.

This Subcommittee should show the same concern for cultural and environmental interests and treaty obligations, as we have for commercial interests.

I hope that our goal with this hearing regarding grazing on western lands can be the same – to support and advance the appropriate and sustainable use of federal lands.

As Chairman Wheeler has stated, **I quote,**

“The Nez Perce Tribe considers recovery of Bighorn sheep populations to huntable, healthy and sustainable levels within our homeland, and throughout their suitable historic habitat to be a top resource management priority. Our collective actions have the power to help or hinder this recovery.”

Indeed.

A focus on commercial interests to the exclusion of cultural and environmental equities and treaty obligations will hinder the recovery of the Bighorn sheep.

I urge this Subcommittee to consider Chairman Wheeler’s testimony about the ways that the federal government can protect the environment and tribal culture as we examine different opportunities for grazing on public land.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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