

**Remarks to Western Governors' Association
Las Vegas, NV
December 6, 2014**

Length: 20-25 minutes (Q&A not expected, but is possible from governors)

Main message:

- *WGA is rooted in partnership, bipartisan leadership*
- *Public lands benefit all communities*
- *Working together to solve complex problems – landscape-level approach*
- *Greater sage-grouse perfect example of working together, need to act now*
- *Threat of rangeland fires and directing a new strategy*
- *Need everyone to stick together and stay at the table*

I. Acknowledgements [1 minute]

- **Energy Secretary Ernie Moniz** *(leaving before your keynote)*
- **Governor Brian Sandoval**, Chair of WGA
- **Governor John Kitzhaber**, Vice Chair of WGA *(unable to attend)*
- Other esteemed Governors
- Members of Interior's Team
 - **Janice Schneider**, Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management
 - **Dan Ashe**, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
 - **Neil Kornze**, Director of the Bureau of Land Management

- **Jim Lyons**, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Management
- **Sarah Greenberger**, Counselor, Office of the Secretary

II. **WGA is rooted in partnership, bipartisan leadership** [1 min]

- **fourth time** at Western Governors' Association as Secretary
- **impressed with the bipartisan, practical efforts** this organization has taken on to get things done
- breath of fresh air to be out West and out of **Washington, D.C.**

III. **Value of Investing in Public Lands and Resources** [3 mins]

- As Congress debates how to keep the lights on, people here understand **the value of investing in America's public lands**
- Mere hours after the **government shutdown** last year, my phone starting ringing from some of the governors in this room. **Governors who know:**
 - keeping these special places open meant **big business to local communities**
 - we create **\$10 in economic activity for every \$1 we invest** in national parks
 - outdoor recreation– an industry that generates **\$646 billion annually** – is heavily supported by America's public lands

- we **disbursed \$13 billion this year – several billion that goes directly to states** – for revenues generated from energy production on public lands and waters (*more than the DOI annual budget*)
- **Every single community benefits** from the work of the Interior Department: safe and responsible production of **energy...** to driving **tourism ...** to **sharing resources** when it comes to **fighting fires ...** **tackling drought...** protecting **natural and cultural resources**

IV. **Working Together to Solve Complex Issues** [3 mins]

- **bipartisan and practical** leadership of the WGA is **needed now more than ever** (climate change... drought... growing populations)
 - **Solutions are equally complex** – and can't be accomplished alone
- Interior – federal partners – wants to **continue to be your partner** in helping impacted farmers, ranchers, small businesses, and communities
- We are working to **take a landscape-level approach** in everything we do
- **Perfect example** is our efforts to **conserve sagebrush habitat** that supports the western way of life and rural economies

V. **Greater Sage-Grouse and 3-legged stool approach** [6 mins]

- I've talked about greater sage-grouse at previous meetings, so I won't spend lots of time describing the issue. I think we all know that:
 - **Sagebrush habitat facing unprecedented threats, including** urbanization, wildfire, poorly planned development, and invasive species like cheatgrass

- o The sagebrush ecosystem has been called **one of the most imperiled ecosystems in the entire US** – yet, it is landscape that most of us associate with the West
 - o Losing this land has great impacts: on **rural economies, on hundreds of species**, and on the Western way of life
- Over the past year, I’ve had opportunity to see what’s happening on the ground – and it’s **impressive**
 - o **Craig, Colorado** – Bord Gulch Ranch (*rancher = Ray Owens*)
 - o **Lakeview, Oregon** – South Warner Juniper Removal Project (*toured John O’Keefe’s ranch*)
 - o **Twin Falls, Idaho** – Browns Bench / China Mountain fire damage
 - o **Pinedale, Wyoming** – 9 landowners cover 39,000 acres with CCAAs (*toured Brad Bousman’s ranch*)
 - o Just this week – **5 Soil and Water Conservation Districts in Oregon** have asked for FWS approval of CCAAs covering **1.3 millions acres of private land in seven Oregon counties**. (*patterned after a similar agreement earlier this year in Harney County, Oregon, in which ranchers have already enrolled a quarter million acres*)
- We’re seeing an **unprecedented and proactive partnership (Ashe: ‘epic collaboration’)** among all gov’t partners and landowners
- **Today my message to you is** – we’ve got **great momentum & strong partnerships: Don’t stop now**
- The FWS has made clear that they will require **3 things (3-legged stool)**:
 - **Strong federal plans**
 - **Strong state plans**
 - An effective **strategy to reduce the risk of fire** to sage grouse
- **BLM and the Forest Service** are working with the **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service** and the states to finalize their plans
 - o **final drafts out in the spring of next year**

- discussing changes with partners, we will have **STRONG** plans for sage grouse conservation across the remaining range
- The BLM is only one part of the equation. State and private lands make up **1/3 of the priority habitat** and more than **½ of the general habitat**. As the FWS has made clear, **we need to see robust state plans** that provide the **regulatory certainty that the agency needs to avoid the need to list**
 - **Many states have stepped up** to develop strong plans
 - **Several others still need to do more**
- **The time to roll up our sleeves is NOW while we have the momentum**
- **The habitat is only going to get more fragmented**, with more fires and invasive species and development
- The longer we wait to act, the only thing that gets more certain is an **unhappy fate for the bird** and all the other wildlife dependent on those landscapes
- Some are calling to delay our work, but **kicking the can down the road will not provide certainty to energy developers or ranchers or states**
- **Delay is simply is not a solution**
- We have a **window of opportunity** to make a difference – and do it in a way that protects the **western way of life** and economic activity

VI. Threat of Rangeland Fires – Directing new strategy [5 mins]

- **The third leg of the stool** is an effective strategy for addressing the threat of **rangeland fire in the Great Basin**

- Habitat loss due to **rangeland fire is the most significant threat** to the sage grouse, but also to other wildlife, ranching, recreation and economic activity
- **The invasion of non-native annual grasses made worse by climate change** is causing fires to **grow larger, more intense and more costly**
 - Fires generally occurred every **30 to 75 years**
 - In cheat grass ranges, fires occurs **every 10 years or less**
 - I stood in an area of Idaho where fires had burned **4 times in 10 years**
(*anecdote from Idaho and rural fire associations*)
- At **WGA meeting in June**, we discussed the need to improve our wildland fire-fighting capacity
- Thanks to the Western governors for helping make the case for more flexible funding for **dealing with catastrophic fire like the “catastrophe” it is**
(*budget letter*)
- **Assistant Secretary Janice Schneider followed up and recently convened a conference** in Idaho
 - included **fire experts and land managers** at the federal, state and local levels
 - Representatives from **OR, ID, UT, and NV**
 - What we heard was the **need for comprehensive strategy and a landscape-scale approach**
 - Firefighter and public safety will remain our highest fire management priority, but it’s clear that **we can and should be doing more to fight rangeland fires**

- So today **I am announcing that I am directing Department leadership to develop a comprehensive strategy** to fight rangeland fire with an eye toward **protecting rural communities, sagebrush landscapes, and important habitats essential to the conservation of the sage grouse** and other wildlife
- We will **work hand in hand with Governors** and those on the ground to make sure they have the information, training, and tools to more effectively fight the threat of rangeland fires
- And **we're not going to take our time on this** – we have a fire season right around the corner, and it's my intent to have a strategy in place as soon as possible
- Know that there's tough work ahead on protecting sagebrush habitat, but if we all pull our oars in the same direction, **I'm optimistic we can get there**

VII. Conclusion: Thanks for staying at the table [1 min]

- Working together, across the landscape, we can
 - protect iconic sagebrush landscapes
 - conserve sage grouse, mule deer, and other important wildlife species
 - continue to grow the Western economy without destroying the quality of life that is at the heart of being a “Westerner”
- 35 years in business – value of working together vs. short sound bytes
- State, federal public servants will be working on these tough issues long after we leave these jobs, so want to **express gratitude** to those in this room working on behalf of the American people
- **Thanks to WGA** and the governors up here for being a part of the solution