

**Written Testimony of Lyle Hodgskiss
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Rocky Mountain Front Advisory Committee
H.R. 3534, Title IV
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate this opportunity to present my perspectives on H.R. 3534 the Comprehensive Land, Energy, and Aquatic Resources Act of 2009. My name is Lyle Hodgskiss. I am a third generation Montana rancher and the Senior Loan Officer for Citizen's State Bank of Choteau in Choteau, Montana. I am also a member of the Rocky Mountain Front Advisory Committee that provides counsel to the efforts of The Nature Conservancy and others in their on-going effort to protect the Rocky Mountain Front (RMF) of Montana. I am testifying today on behalf of that committee.

In 2005, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service identified 250,000 acres of Montana's Rocky Mountain Front as a Conservation Area. This designation authorizes the USFWS to spend Land and Water Conservation Funds to purchase conservation easements on the Front. The RMF conservation area was established to protect the working agricultural and ranching landscapes of the RMF, while simultaneously protecting the world class natural resources in the place I call home.

My hometown of Choteau Montana is part of the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area. This is one of the newest conservation areas established by the FWS, and just two established by the Fish and Wildlife Services during the previous administration. The Nature Conservancy has been present on the Rocky Mountain Front for 30 years and even before the establishment of the conservation area, the Nature Conservancy established The Rocky Mountain Front Advisory Committee to assist their efforts to conserve land on the Front.

I support Title IV of H.R. 3534 and I thank Chairman Rahall for his leadership on fully funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

LWCF is the principal source of federal investments to protect the Front. Since 2005, \$3.98 million in LWCF investments have contributed to the protection of 43,000 acres of private land, and leveraged \$29 million in private philanthropy. Last year, LWCF funding enabled the FWS to secure an easement on Clay Crawford's ranch on the Front. At 12,130 acres, This is the largest FWS conservation easement ever purchased by the Fish and Wildlife Service in the continental United States.

This is just the latest piece of the successful conservation story of the Rocky Mountain Front. The Rocky Mountain Front is unique for a number of reasons. It is a vast, largely unspoiled landscape. It is part of the larger Crown of Continent comprising Glacier

National Park, the Bob Marshall Wilderness complex and the surrounding public and private lands. Together the Crown covers over 10-plus million acres, an area larger than Massachusetts and Connecticut combined. The Crown, including the Front, is the only place in the lower 48 states that contains ALL of the plant and animal species that were present when Lewis and Clark passed through.

The Front is home to a unique and thriving population of grizzly bears. With some of the highest-quality seasonal habitat left, the Front's large intact ranches boast very high-density bear use during the spring and fall months. These grizzlies have higher reproductive rates, heavier cub weights, and adult bears rivaling the size of their Alaskan siblings. The Front is also one of the last places on earth where grizzlies still use their natural plains habitat.

Land and Water Conservation Funds are essential to conservation on the Rocky Mountain Front. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works closely with the local community and organizations like the Nature Conservancy and The Conservation Fund to protect the Front, and craft solutions that work for agriculture, rural communities, and biodiversity. To date, each dollar of LWCF funds leverages more than \$5 of private money, other public sources, and the critical match components for sources like NAWCA to stretch the federal investment. Since 1978, the Front partnership has protected 138,000 acres of private lands, and in doing so, supported the rural heritage and culture in the Front communities. Land and Water Conservation Funds have made it possible for this partnership (USFWS, TNC and TCF) to work at a landscape level – while addressing concerns from the agriculture community and achieving globally-significant conservation measures.

I want to emphasize that this has been a local conservation effort based on voluntary participation. The Rocky Mountain Front Advisory Committee counsels The Nature Conservancy on its efforts but it is truly a public/private partnership that is making this project work. There is tremendous support from the agricultural community, as well as other elements of the community, to see the project to a successful conclusion.

The LWCF investment in conservation easements goes beyond the preservation of the landscape. Purchase of conservation easements helps to ensure the economic vitality of the ranching community, the many businesses agriculture supports, and the larger area economy. The current "inventory" of rangeland that is on a waiting list to participate in this project (by obtaining conservation easements over that land) exceeds 120,000 acres. This clearly demonstrates the strong broad based support that our project enjoys.

Conservation easements provide ranchers with a necessary tool, and access to funds that can be used by them in a variety of ways to improve their operations, such as to reduce the debt level on their operation in order to become more viable from a cash flow standpoint, acquire additional land to improve their economies of scale, invest in better infrastructure (fences, watering systems, irrigation systems, buildings, technology) to improve their efficiency. All of these options make ranching operations more profitable

and sustainable, which in turn, pass the success onto the rural communities that depend on agriculture for their own viability.

Those are the principal reasons I support fully funding LWCF. Purchase of conservation easements not only protects and preserves the iconic landscape of the Rocky Mountain Front, but it helps it help the larger community as well.

But it's not just in my community on the Front. LWCF has been a flexible funding source for important conservation actions throughout Montana, both on private and public land. The Front is an easement only project. Elsewhere in Montana, especially with my friends in the Blackfoot Community Project in the Blackfoot River valley, LWCF is used to acquire fee title to lands and facilitate land sales (as additions to the national forests and BLM holdings), as well as conservation easements.

Similar to our advisory committee, the Blackfoot Community Project is a community-based, community-supported effort to preserve the land and character of that valley. This group, from a community-based grass roots perspective, concluded that federal ownership would ensure continued public access to important recreational lands, while ensuring protection of critical wildlife habitat.

When complete, the Blackfoot Community Project will conserve over 100,000 acres in diverse public and private ownerships. It will help maintain a rural way of life for that community. LWCF is and has been a critical funding component of this project.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund leverages landscape-level accomplishments throughout Montana. LWCF Funds are a necessary component in the Blackfoot valley, in the Centennial valley west of Yellowstone National Park, in the Beartooth Mountains south of Billings, and in many other places throughout Montana and the West.

On the Rocky Mountain Front we are experiencing a crisis of opportunity for private land conservation. Last year's economic downturn, a time of generational transfer and associated estate issues, as well as the need to increase operations and update technology to remain competitive, have affected awareness and encouraged landowners to re-assess their operations and their "tools" to maintain those livelihoods. On the Rocky Mountain Front, conservation easements are seen as an important new management tool for the community. So important in fact that current landowner-demand for easements on the Front again, has grown by 120% in just one year, to the previously mentioned 120,000 acres.

I support full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, for the many reasons cited above. As important as full funding, however, is the provision making full funding permanent. Permanent funding will give people and the agencies the ability to anticipate and plan for future projects knowing there will be an available source of funds available. It will allow for more efficiency and cost-effectiveness over the long term, to the benefit of America's heritage, and our rural places like Montana's Rocky Mountain Front. Previously, as the federal commitment to LWCF has varied greatly, the ability of The

Nature Conservancy and USFWS to work with land owners to protect their land has also fluctuated. In addition to generation transfer and associated estate issues and the challenging economy, this lack of certainty has contributed to the current backlog of opportunities on the Front, and other project areas in other rural places throughout the West.

Again, I want to express my support for full and permanent funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund as expressed in Title IV of Chairman Rahall's H.R. 3534.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I welcome any questions you may have.