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The America's Great Outdoors Team -

The undersigned partners of the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition are writing to express our support for including the following priorities within the President's American Great Outdoors Initiative (Initiative).

The California Rangeland Conservation Coalition is an unprecedented group of ranchers, environmental organizations, scientists and government agencies. Together, these partners strive to preserve private working landscapes, support the long-term viability of the ranching business, and protect and enhance California rangeland for both legally protected and still-common species. This unique partnership views this initiative as a potential avenue to help promote, support and foster the collaborative approaches to conservation we believe are necessary to keep California's working rangelands intact.

Challenges: What obstacles exist to achieving your goals for conservation, recreation or reconnecting?

There is a demand that far exceeds the financial resources available to voluntarily enhance and permanently preserve private working ranches. A fundamental goal of the Initiative should be to increase the funding available for voluntary conservation easements held by third-parties. There are ranchers across the west who have placed their ranch under a conservation easement, preventing development and fragmentation of vast open spaces in perpetuity. The ecological and economic values of these ranches today are ensured for future generations, while the long term stewardship remains the responsibility of the rancher, who also continues to pay property and other relevant taxes. There is a long list of ranchers who are willing to permanently preserve their ranches and we urge that the Initiative provide additional funding for the voluntary acquisition of conservation easements on private working ranches in strategic places.

In addition, this initiative should place a significant focus on voluntary natural resource stewardship enhancement opportunities on private working lands. Both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - Partners Program and the Natural Resources Conservation

Service Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) are key examples of successful programs that cost-share voluntarily with private individuals to improve natural resources. Presently, both programs lack adequate funding to meet the demand. This initiative should bolster programs that have proven to be successful and where landowner demand outstrips program availability, in order to improve the nation's natural resources.

A long-standing challenge to our partnership's overall mission is the estate tax. The Rangeland Coalition supports permanent, targeted reform of the estate tax in ways that both preserve private working ranches and reward commitments to lasting rangeland conservation. We believe an important means of helping meet the goals of this Initiative would be to support permanent and targeted reform of the estate tax, assisting in the preservation of large intact ranches that support a diversity of native plant and wildlife species. In California, the estate tax is one of the leading causes of the breakup and loss of family-owned ranching operations. California ranching families faced with estate tax debts are often left with no choice but to liquidate assets or sell significant portions of their property.

What Works: Please share your thoughts and ideas of effective strategies for conservation, recreation and reconnecting people to the outdoors?

It is imperative that this initiative highlight the importance of collaborative partnerships that include land owners in the decision making process and inter-agency communication. We believe our partnership is a good illustration of how ranchers, environmentalists, and agencies can establish common ground and work together to address mutual priorities. To date over 100 organizations have signed the California Rangeland Resolution to express their support for the work of the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition.

The Rangeland Coalition has come a long way because of the dedication of non-governmental organizations and support of agency partners. Therefore, the Initiative should support the participation of agency staff and financial support of collaborative conservation efforts that pull together landowners, agencies and interested stakeholders.

Conservation easements, placed voluntarily on private working ranches have proven over the past decade to be a successful means to keep large tracts of working ranches as wide open spaces. Permanent conservation easements on working ranches forever restrict the use of the land to agricultural purposes, while keeping ranchers managing their own ranches. This method preserves the present state of both the land and the ranching operation for future generations. Through the use of conservation easements as a preservation tool, the privately-owned ranches remain on property tax rolls, providing tax income to the local community. Land preserved with a conservation easement with government dollars is also less expensive than fee title acquisition, both

initially and over time, because the landowner is responsible for management and maintenance.

Federal Government Role – How can the federal government be a more effective partner in helping to achieve conservation, recreation or reconnecting people to the outdoors?

A long standing challenge to implementing voluntary conservation on the ground is the need to obtain permits from various local, state and federal agencies to complete the projects. The Initiative should support interagency collaboration to improve the regulatory atmosphere for voluntary conservation projects. For example, efforts to create programmatic permits and streamlined permitting amongst agencies for voluntary restoration and enhancement projects should continue in the future. Partners in the Rangeland Coalition are aware that ranchers seeking to implement voluntary habitat restoration projects face a complex regulatory process. Our partnership supports opportunities to help ranchers complete environmentally beneficial projects on an expedited process, while still preserving the integrity of the environmental regulatory program.

Another area of potential improvement is enhancement of the Land and Water Conservation Fund to allow for funding of conservation easements to be purchased and held by third parties in order to achieve national conservation goals in priority landscapes. Ranches and other working lands play a vital role in maintaining ecological processes and connectivity across large areas. Preventing the fragmentation or conversion of large working lands to other uses can be essential to the long-term ecological health of federal conservation lands and the survival of the plants and animals that depend on them.

Partnerships between federal land management agencies and the private sector can be the most effective and efficient way to maintain the public benefits that private working lands can provide. Existing models for such partnership include the Department of Defense's Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative (REPI). This program achieves federal goals through grants to non-federal entities with a clear purpose of protecting habitat for federally-listed species, and maintaining the ability of the military to test and train.

The clear purpose of the new program would be to maintain ecological processes and habitat connectivity between and around federal conservation lands in strategic landscapes. Federal and state partnerships with non-governmental entities and landowners can be the most cost-effective way to achieve this goal. Strategic targeting of Farm Bill easement and stewardship funding to priority landscapes can be part of the solution. However, the demand for such programs already far exceeds the available resources. Federal land management agencies also need enhanced ability to advance

national conservation goals in priority landscapes through strategic grants to non-federal partners.

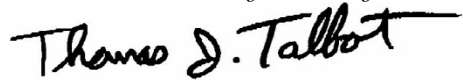
Tools – What additional tools and resources would help your efforts be even more successful?

In short, our partnership sees financial constraints and particular program requirements that hinder additional on the ground voluntary enhancement and preservation on private working ranches. We encourage the Initiative to solicit and support stakeholder input in improving the effectiveness and efficiency of current programs and the allocation of additional funding to voluntary conservation programs. In addition, outreach and education about the outdoors and agriculture--in particular the public benefits produced by private working lands--is an important element to include in the Initiative, targeting the general public, agency staff and elected officials.

Thank you for accepting our comments. If you have any questions please contact Tracy Schohr, Director of Rangeland Conservation at (916) 444-0845 or tschohr@calcattlemen.org.

Sincerely,

Partners of the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition



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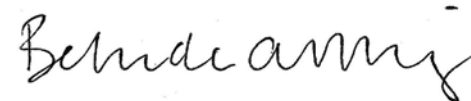
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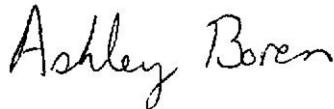
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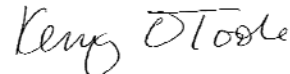
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