



Sunday, October 4, 2009

Lummis champions land conservation

Every year, hundreds of thousands of visitors flock to the North Platte River outside of Casper to experience beautiful scenery and some of the best fishing for rainbow and brown trout in the country. The 30-mile Gray Reef is hailed as one of the most productive stretches of the North Platte and is considered by many to be the number one trophy trout fishing destination in the lower 48 states.

Back in 2007, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) permanently secured public access to this prized fishing destination by purchasing a key 275-acre property with more than a mile of river frontage along the Gray Reef stretch of the North Platte.

With critical financial assistance from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and Wyoming Fly Casters, and additional support from the Natrona County Commissioners, BLM was able to do this using an important law for Western land conservation and public hunting and fishing access -- the Federal Land Transaction Facilitation Act (FLTFA). This innovative legislation allows the proceeds from sales of nonstrategic public land -- land with not much public benefit that is isolated or difficult to manage -- to be used by BLM, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service, and to purchase private land with exceptional conservation value, like the North Platte property, from willing sellers. Through FLTFA, BLM has sold land to landowners in Sublette, Carbon, Sweetwater and other counties, providing a great benefit to ranchers and farmers and increasing private land ownership.

In a time of increased budget pressures, FLTFA balances conservation and economics and demonstrates a creative way to generate funds to acquire high priority land for conservation, outdoor recreation and historic preservation without impacting the budget deficit.

Successful as it is, FLTFA is set to expire next year. However, U.S. Representatives Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming and Martin Heinrich of New Mexico, both recognizing FLTFA's benefits to the public, wildlife, public land management agencies and the federal budget, have introduced a bipartisan bill, H.R. 3339, to reauthorize and update FLTFA. If Congress follows their lead and approves the FLTFA reauthorization bill, Wyoming stands to gain access to even more world class natural areas like the North Platte.

Representatives Lummis and Heinrich are to be commended for taking this important first step toward protecting the West's natural legacy. With their leadership, along with the support of community level land managers, landowners and other Western leaders, we can continue our work to protect our most treasured landscapes, unparalleled recreation areas, iconic wildlife and unique historic sites.

Gray Thornton of Cody is president and CEO of the Wild Sheep Foundation and sits on the board of directors for The Conservation Fund. He is the former executive director of the Dallas Safari Club.