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March 11, 2008

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Scientists seek protection for 26 million acres of public lands

Researchers ask Congress to vote yes on National Landscape Conservation System

Ashland, Ore. – A group of 31 independent scientists representing 14 states today endorsed a national effort to provide permanent protection for the National Landscape Conservation System -- a unified system of conservation lands managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM). All the scientists have extensive experience in field research, particularly involving Conservation System lands, and are calling on Congress to support the National Landscape Conservation System Act (HR 2016). The legislation received a yes vote today from the House Natural Resources Committee and now makes its way toward a vote by the full House.

“I have worked intensively in Las Cienegas National Conservation Area (NCA) and Ironwood Forest National Monument, and also done considerable work in San Pedro River NCA and Sonoran Desert National Monument. I consider each of them as valuable as any National Park Service system unit in the Southwest”, says Philip C. Rosen, a research scientist with University of Arizona School of Natural Resources.

The Conservation System was administratively designated in 2000 to “conserve, protect, and restore these nationally significant landscapes that have outstanding cultural, ecological, and scientific values for the benefit of current and future generations.”

Important resources contained within the system include:

- **Cultural:** Extensive evidence of 13,000 years of human history can be found on BLM-administered lands. Scientific examination and study of these resources is providing insight into how people, ranging from prehistoric Native Americans to 19th and 20th century pioneers, lived on and with the land. Archaeologists estimate there are likely to be 4.5 million cultural sites on all BLM-administered lands.
- **Paleontological:** Fossils found on BLM-administered lands provide important insight into the evolution of plant and animal communities, the systematic relationship between species, and the response of ecosystems to global changes in

their environment. The understandings gained from study of these paleontological resources can help us predict impacts and responses likely to occur in the face of future global climate changes.

- **Biological:** Numerous unique plant and animal species are found on BLM administered lands, including 228 plant and animal species listed as threatened or endangered and more than 1,500 additional “sensitive” species that are at some risk due to a reduction in the number of individuals or a naturally limited distribution. In addition, BLM administers 144,000 miles of streamside riparian areas and 13 million acres of wetlands – providing water resources that hold an especially critical place in the ecological web of life, supporting hundreds of other species such as pronghorn, mule deer, bighorn sheep, elk and migratory birds.

Unlike National Parks and Wildlife Refuges, the Conservation System currently has no Congressional recognition. The fact that each unit in the system stands alone leaves each unit, and the system as a whole, vulnerable to being dissolved and mismanaged. A stamp of approval by Congress would help ensure that the Conservation System is recognized as a single, unified system within the BLM, ensuring consistent management in keeping with the system’s conservation mission and each area’s establishing legislation or proclamations. This would provide the long-term management stability necessary to conduct ecological studies, provide protection to important fish and wildlife habitats, and result in greater protection of cultural resources.