SEDINGER TEXT NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

I am Jim Sedinger, Foundation Professor, Emeritus, University of Nevada Reno, for the record. Thank you to Chairman Donate and other members of the Natural Resources Committee for hearing our comments on SJR 3. We know your time is extremely valuable so your attention is really appreciated. I have two tasks today, first, to talk about the impacts of wild horses and burros on Nevada's native wildlife, and second to very briefly summarize our request to you as contained in SJR 3.

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The figure you see shows the biomass equivalents of wild horses and burros (orange bars) versus Nevada's native big game (blue bars). We do not show this figure to claim that increases in horses and burros are directly causing a decline in native wildlife. We don't have the science to support such a claim statewide, although I'll discuss in a minute scientific evidence for a negative effect of horses on several species of native wildlife. This figure is intended to raise the question of rebalancing our priorities with respect to conservation and management of our wild places in Nevada. This figure shows that the biomass of horses and burros is nearly three times that of our native big game at the current time. I want to emphasize that this figure does not include the dozens of other wildlife species that depend on our wild lands. If horses and burros were brought back into balance with the habitats they occupy (as indicated by the green line, which is the Appropriate Management Level for Nevada, and as intended by the original Act), the biomass of native big game would be nearly twice that of horses and burros. We suggest that doing so would represent a proper balancing of our priorities with respect to horses, burros and wildlife. To put this in societal perspective, a 2011 survey found that more than 600,000 Nevadans participated in wildlife-related activity, ranging from simply viewing to hunting or fishing, and they spent more than $1B on these activities.

As Dr. Swanson just discussed, free-roaming horses have considerable negative impact on riparian areas in Nevada. These areas represent < 5% (and some estimates are as low as 1%) of the landscape but they are critical for the maintenance of wildlife populations in Nevada because they are the areas providing nutritious food for young animals during their critical growth period.

Numerous studies, cited in our fact sheet, demonstrate that horses and burros prevent native wildlife from gaining access to these resources or reduce their access because horses are socially dominant to native wildlife. Additionally, horses and burros substantially degrade riparian areas, so that even when native wildlife can approach there is less food and water available to them. This problem, of course, also has negative effects on the horses themselves.

In 17 years of work on sage-grouse in Nevada, every single chick that survived was using a riparian area (or a higher elevation mountain shrub community) that provided green vegetation during the dry summer. So, these green areas are critical to sage-grouse; without them populations simply disappear.

Horses deplete key forage plants for sage-grouse chicks and survival of sage-grouse chicks declines rapidly as horse numbers increase. Recently, Dr. Pete Coates of the U.S. Geological Survey made a presentation to the Nevada Sagebrush Ecosystem Council, in which he showed that in areas where horses were at or below AML, sage-grouse were stable or increasing. In areas, where horses were above AML, sage-grouse declined. This work indicates that AML is a meaningful management goal for the maintenance of ecological balance and thriving rangelands.

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Our resolution asks for two related outcomes: (1) increased support for the resources BLM needs to effectively manage wild horses and burros; and (2), rapid return of horse and burro populations in nature to numbers identified as Appropriate Management Levels (or AML). Getting numbers down to AML as quickly as possible also benefits the horses themselves because fewer animals need to be handled and it increases food and water for the animals left on the range, which improves the health of wild horses, in addition to wildlife.

There is an urgent need to act because horse numbers increase at 15-20% per year, which means that a one year delay adds 15-20,000 horses to wild populations. Even at the levels we have today BLM needs to remove more horses each year than they ever have in any single year in the past to bring numbers down. So, even with no more horses added to the range, we are asking BLM to annually do something they have never done before. Horse and burro numbers are rapidly approaching a level where we will not be able to manage them, except through ecological catastrophe,

which will negatively affect all native wildlife, residents of Nevada and the horses and burros, themselves. We, therefore urge passage of SJR 3 and support of BLM's efforts to bring horse and burro numbers down as rapidly as is feasible, which would restore wild horse and burro populations to levels intended by Congress when the Act was originally passed.

Thank you very much for your time.