NEWSMAKER: Cowboy is likely pick to lead BLM's embattled Nev. office

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With a forked mustache, a cowboy hat and a silk kerchief around his neck, John Ruhs defies the image of a buttoned-up federal bureaucrat.

But his rural roots and no-nonsense style have won him plaudits in his five-month stint as acting director of the Bureau of Land Management's Nevada office.

Ruhs, 57, this summer brokered a truce with Nevada ranchers who had openly defied BLM's grazing restrictions and ridden horses from the Pacific Ocean to the U.S. Capitol to air grievances over the agency's management.

He also helped resolve a permitting fight with Burning Man, the weeklong counterculture festival that takes place on BLM-managed lands in northwest Nevada's Black Rock Desert (Greenwire, Aug. 10).

Ruhs is expected to be tapped as the agency's new permanent state director, multiple insiders said.

It's a tough job in a state that gave birth to the Sagebrush Rebellion in the 1970s, when ranchers tried to shirk BLM's authority, and where rogue rancher Cliven Bundy refuses to pay fees to graze his cows.

John Ruhs said his rural background has helped him negotiate tough permitting issues with Nevada's ranchers. Photo courtesy of BLM.

A handful of influential players say Ruhs is up to the task.

"I've been quite impressed with his success to date," said former BLM Director Bob Abbey, who served as the Nevada state director for several years and is now a consultant for the firm that runs Burning Man. "He would be the right person for the job at this time."

BLM has made no official personnel announcements.

The agency last Friday held a going-away party for Ruhs, who for the time being plans to return to Springfield, Va., to resume his role as BLM's Eastern states director, a post he began one year ago. Amy Lueders has been BLM's Nevada state director since 2011. But she's been serving as acting assistant director for renewable resources and planning at BLM headquarters in Washington, D.C., since the spring.

The Nevada job carries unique challenges.

The Reno-based post supervises several hundred employees who oversee 48 million acres accounting for more than two-thirds of the Silver State's land base. No state has a higher percentage of lands managed by BLM.
As a result, BLM's decisions have major ramifications on the state's rural economy.

While most ranchers get along just fine with BLM, relationships have been tested in recent years as Nevada suffers from drought that has forced BLM to scale back the number of cows and sheep allowed to graze on the public estate.

The Nevada office also manages more than 25,000 wild horses and burros, more than every other BLM state office combined. Conflicting laws require the agency to protect both the horses, which compete with livestock for forage, and the rights of ranchers. The agency recently fought off a lawsuit by Nevada counties backed by agricultural interests seeking to force BLM to remove more horses from the range.

"I think he inherited quite the challenge," Abbey said of Ruhs. "The future of Nevada is truly based on how public lands in that state are managed."

'Range rider'

Ruhs is no stranger to ranching life.

He was born to a farming family in Iowa and left at age 17 to join the Marines. After four years of active duty, he moved to the West to work on ranches and farms, herding cows and shoeing horses to help pay for college. He earned a degree in animal science from the University of Idaho.

Ruhs joined BLM in the late 1980s in Vale, Ore., as a seasonal "range rider" who monitored livestock use on remote federal lands and checked fences.

He'd set out on Mondays by horseback -- normally alone and with a dog -- and would camp for days amid rolling hills of sagebrush, pine trees and quaking aspen below 10,000-foot mountain peaks.

"I put a lot of miles on horses," Ruhs said.

He was eventually hired full-time with BLM as a range technician in Idaho Falls, Idaho, where he managed livestock allotments. Ruhs later oversaw wild horse adoptions at BLM's Milwaukee office before returning west to manage rangeland fire in BLM's Winnemucca, Nev., district.

"He performed admirably in that role," said Abbey, who was Nevada state director when Ruhs was in Winnemucca.

Ruhs was the first at BLM to train ranchers to form rangeland fire protection associations to help the agency fight such fires, Abbey said. BLM today is expanding those associations in the Great Basin to help it protect sage grouse from wildfire and invasive weeds.

Ruhs later served as a BLM district manager in Ely, Nev., and Rock Springs, Wyo., and as senior special assistant in Washington, D.C. He was tapped a year ago to lead the agency's Eastern states office, a post that oversees 40 million subsurface acres in 31 states (E&ENews PM, Sept. 11, 2014). Director Neil Kornze called him "one of the most seasoned land managers in our organization."
Ruhs' wife, Amy, works for BLM in Wyoming. They have seven daughters, who live in Colorado, Nevada, Wyoming and Idaho, and 21 grandchildren.

Ruhs said he likes to ride horses and hike on public lands and has a McNab sheepdog named J.R.

"I just like being out," he said.

'Just like us'

Ruhs took that plain-spoken approach to his job as Nevada's acting chief, which he began in mid-April.

His first big test came in June when the Filippinis, a prominent ranching family in north-central Nevada, announced plans to set out hundreds of cattle on the North Buffalo allotment in open defiance of BLM's decision to close the lands in 2013 due to drought (Greenwire, June 4).

Ruhs had been working for weeks with the Filippinis to negotiate a solution, but the ranchers' move, which was advertised on Facebook and covered in the media, threatened those talks. It came, too, as BLM faced criticism from environmentalists for failing to punish ranchers -- Bundy in particular -- who broke the law.

But within days, Ruhs was able to cut a deal to reopen the North Buffalo and Copper Canyon allotments, and the Filippinis agreed to remove the cattle if grasses got too low (E&ENews PM, June 10).

Ruhs said his personal meetings with the ranchers helped earn their trust.

"I try to understand where they're coming from," he said. "You look through their eyes if you can."

That required plenty of face time. In late May, Ruhs and his wife, who was on vacation, joined the Filippinis and another ranching family for a tour of allotments BLM had closed.

Eddyann Filippini said she has found Ruhs to be fair and trustworthy.

"We think very highly of John," she said. "He truly believes in the multiple uses of the public lands."

It helps that he also knows how to raise livestock, Filippini said.

"He's walked the walk," she said. "He's just like us."

A couple of weeks later, BLM signed a separate agreement with the Filippinis and other ranchers to return cattle to the Argenta allotment, which BLM had closed a year earlier due to drought, angering ranchers.

"I come from the same place," Ruhs said of his relationship with Nevada ranchers. "I talk the same way. I look the same way."

Travis Bruner, executive director of Western Watersheds Project, an anti-grazing environmental group, said Ruhs' overture to ranchers has come at the expense of the environment.
"He tailors his appearance to make it clear he's an ally of ranchers above all," Bruner said. "He doesn't seem concerned with satisfying the needs of the landscape or wildlife."

WWP and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility in June blasted BLM's settlement with Nevada ranchers, accusing the agency of sanctioning "rogue grazing."

"By this settlement, the BLM validated that willful grazing trespass will be a successful negotiating tactic," the groups wrote in a letter to Interior Secretary Sally Jewell.

Ruhs said BLM must manage lands for a multitude of uses and that he's willing to meet with anyone to find compromise.

"We give everybody a seat at the table and a fair shot," he said.

Abbey said Ruhs' involvement in the Burning Man negotiations was key. The agency had been criticized in the media as well as by Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.), a key ally, for demanding that the festival provide expanded amenities for BLM employees as a condition to operate on BLM lands (Greenwire, June 29).

"We asked for John to insert himself in that discussion," Abbey said. "He worked with the Burning Man organization to address the various issues to reach agreement acceptable by all."

'Straight shooter'

Shaaron Netherton, executive director of Friends of Nevada Wilderness, who previously worked more than 20 years for BLM in Nevada and Oregon, said Ruhs deserves praise for his candor and accessibility.

"He's always been a straight shooter," said Netherton, who worked with Ruhs while she was lobbying for a wilderness bill in White Pine County, Nev., in 2006. "I never felt like we were getting the runaround."

The size of the BLM estate in Nevada underscores the importance of good relations with local governments whose economies are tied to the public lands, Netherton said.

"You get built-in resentment" from counties over BLM's land holdings, she said. "If you have head-butting, it can go south in a big way."

Sen. Dean Heller (R-Nev.) said Ruhs would be a good pick for the Nevada job.

"While we may not agree on everything, John is a hardworking and honest broker who has resolved a variety of long-standing disputes in the state in his short time as interim state director," Heller said in an emailed statement. "His previous public service in Nevada and his willingness to get personally involved in even the most difficult disputes makes him well-suited to serve as permanent state director."
But Reid, who in the past has held significant sway in the Obama administration's BLM appointments, declined to comment.

It's unclear whether Reid has other candidates in mind for the job or if he's choosing to stay on the sidelines of BLM's decision. Reid, who lobbied President Obama this summer to designate a 700,000-acre national monument on BLM lands in Nevada, is not seeking re-election in 2016.

But his thoughts on the Nevada job, if he chooses to weigh in, would carry weight with BLM and the White House, especially because Kornze is Reid's former public lands aide.