



# CONTINENTAL DIVIDE TRAIL COALITION

## **Testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands provided by Teresa Martinez, on behalf of the Continental Divide Trail Coalition**

**November 9, 2021**

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding House Bill 5118, the Continental Divide Trail Completion Act. My name is Teresa Martinez, and I am the co-founder and the Executive Director of the Continental Divide Trail Coalition, the lead national nonprofit, recognized by an Interagency Memorandum of Understanding with the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and National Park Service in 2020, a non-profit organization with the mission to complete, promote, and protect the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail. While our main office is in Golden, CO, CDTC staff presence is spread across the trail, with staff members based in Las Cruces and Santa Fe, New Mexico, Frisco and Colorado Springs, Colorado, and Helena and Big Fork, Montana.

On behalf of CDTC's Board, staff and CDTC members, supporters, partners and gateway communities, we are thrilled to share our excitement and support for the opportunity to complete the CDT. Since CDTC's founding in 2012, we have seen our partnerships, communities, and our initiatives taking place on the ground, grow every year. As Greg Pierce, President of CDTC's Board of Directors, stated upon the bill's introduction:

“In the past 10 years since CDTC's founding, we have seen our trail community, including trail users, local businesses, community leaders, land managers, and others, grow exponentially year after year, and we celebrate this monumental day with them. The introduction of the Continental Divide Trail Completion Act is a great sign of progress for all who care about the CDT and public lands all along the Divide. This legislation reflects a path forward in our mission to complete the Trail, and demonstrates the strength of the public-private partnership that is displayed on a daily basis on the CDT and in the National Trail System.”

Just in the past decade, CDTC has seen important milestones, like completion of the trail progressing from 64% to 95%, and in 2018, an event coordinated between USFS, BLM, CDTC, and other stewardship organization partners to “Blaze the CDT” marking the trail in its entirety for the first time. The stewardship of the CDT and the work happening all along the Divide is one of the best examples of a successful public-private partnership. **CDTC has coordinated over 125,000 hours of volunteer hours to help complete the CDT. In 2021 alone, CDTC and its partners provided over 30k volunteer hours valued at \$822,000 for the stewardship, maintenance, construction, and engagement with members along the CDT, and raised additional \$800,000 in private funding. This represents a 5:1 match on the return on investment that the federal government contributes to trail organizations like CDTC and other private partners.** Our membership also grew to over 2,500 members, we added over a dozen new partnerships, representing diverse stakeholders and communities, designated new Gateway Communities, and recruited 50 new Trail Adopters to steward the CDT. We are grateful for the excitement that the CDT inspires, and we know completion is only going to grow that excitement even more.

For those who have not had the fortune of visiting, the Continental Divide Trail - usually known simply as the CDT - travels 3,100 miles along the spine of the Rocky Mountains. Designed primarily for foot and horse travel, the CDT travels 820 miles in New Mexico, 750 miles in Colorado, 510 miles in Wyoming, and the remaining 1020 miles are shared between Montana and Idaho, many of which are along the states’ borders. More than just a trail, the CDT is a connector of cultures, communities, and landscapes, from the High Desert towns like Silver City along the Gila River in New Mexico to communities like Lincoln on the edge of the Rocky Mountain Front in Montana, the trail is the common thread that weaves together countless natural, historical, and cultural treasures, including **20 National Forests, 25 Wilderness Areas, 3 National Parks, 1 National Monument, and 13 Bureau of Land Management resource areas.**

The trail travels through many different types of lands and is administered by the U.S. Forest Service, in coordination with the National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management to complete, maintain, and manage the CDT. **Recognized by the Secretary of Agriculture as the ONLY National Scenic Trail that is included as one of 15 Trail Maintenance Priority Areas included in the Sustainable Trails Strategy, the management of the CDT has felt the positive impact of the USFS’s shared stewardship principles.** Under the 10 Year Trail Challenge, CDTC has seen the positive impacts of a shared stewardship approach that engages federal agencies, tribes, states, local communities, private partners, and volunteers who value trails as places to learn, connect, and explore. The Trail Challenge has allowed this shared stewardship approach to become more informed of on-the-ground conditions and meet the needs of the communities that are most impacted by public lands. As a companion to the Trail Stewardship Act, this legislation has the potential to bolster these ongoing agency initiatives, and

ensure that as a major priority area for USFS, the momentum to maintain and eventually complete the trail continues to grow.

Over the past two years, we have seen the popularity of our parks, forest, and trails grow exponentially. People, now, more than ever, are looking to our natural places for a place to relax, connect, and heal in community with one another. And while I could point toward the numbers showing a growing number of long distance “thru-hikers” on the CDT and the ever-increasing hours volunteers have invested in the stewardship of the trail year after year, we would like to share this story to illustrate the importance of trail completion:

The CDT Gateway Community of Steamboat Springs, CO is a prime outdoor destination - one where hikers, bikers, equestrians, birders, hunters, fishermen and recreationists of all types flock to to enjoy the abundant opportunities of the outdoors. Travelers approaching town on the CDT get the sweeping ridgeline views of forest valleys and pristine peaks for which the trail is known, with one major exception. Those seeking a continuous, scenic and safe journey on the CDT are diverted onto a 15-mile roadwalk along Highways 14 and 40 after the federal land ownership ends and the abruptly stops at a forest dirt road. This abrupt end turns a journey enjoying the primitive, remoteness of the Never Summer Range and Park View Mountain areas of the Arapaho Roosevelt National Forest and one that the trail was created for, into a journey with an 18-wheeler whizzing by just 5 feet away, followed closely by the daily traffic trying to get up and over Rabbit Ears Pass at the intersection of Highway 40 and 14. This is dangerous for pedestrian traffic who then must walk the shoulder if there is one, but imagine families on bikes or even equestrians pulling a string of horses. Not only is this an experience that is not aligned with the Congress’ vision when they created the trail, but one that is wholly unsafe, intimidating, and dangerous to recreationists and drivers alike. Completion of the trail means a safer, less threatening, more enjoyable experience for everyone, from equestrians attempting the entire CDT to the community members and families who enjoy the trail in their own backyard.

Despite more than four decades of work by dedicated land management agencies, non-profit partners, volunteers, and trail communities, **the trail still remains approximately 5% incomplete, accounting for around 160 miles still located on highways making the Trail Experience dangerous and unscenic. The major gap areas - some in which there are active working groups including agency staff, CDTC staff, community members, and other partners - include:**

- **Monida Pass in Montana: 10.5 miles**
- **Rawlins in Wyoming: 2.1 miles**
- **Muddy Pass in Colorado: 15 miles**
- **Cuba in New Mexico: 10.1 miles**
- **Pie Town to Grants in New Mexico: 60 miles**

- **Mangas Valley in New Mexico: 25 miles**

Since 2009, trail completion efforts have moved the needle from 64% complete in 2009, to 95% in 2021. This tremendous progress is a testament to the dedication on the ground with all our partners, and also speaks to the enthusiasm that recreationists and trail communities have for this world-renowned resource. When we finally have all the tools and resources needed to get the job done, we know we can get this across the finish line.

This legislation is the last in a quiver of tools we now have, that would ensure that this momentum and excitement is not lost, and that trail completion is done the right way - without the use of eminent domain, a tool that contradicts the cooperative stewardship approach that CDTC embraces. Instead it would place decision-making and collaborative efforts into the hands of the communities and stakeholders with long standing land connections to the Divide itself. Working alongside CDTC and our partners, the federal and state agencies can now create a collective vision and future for the CDT - and that is critical because at CDTC's core is our commitment to ensuring that the people most affected by decisions around the CDT- are part of the decision making process, especially Tribal Nations and Native People.

The impact of this bill would not just be felt on the ground, it would create positive impacts across the Divide. There are 19 CDTC-recognized Gateway Communities along the CDT. Most of these towns are rural communities, with the biggest being the first state capitol to become a Gateway Community for ANY National Trail, Helena, Montana. These are all towns that depend, in some part, on the successful and collaborative stewardship of our public lands to support jobs, business, and other parts of the local economy. Many are also in a transition phase, where the outdoor recreation industry is helping to support towns that previously depended on timber, oil and gas, and other industries. As many communities in the West face their young people moving away, housing prices driving out locals, and the permanent loss of jobs in some sectors, these communities have a growing appetite for alternative ways to grow their economy, like the outdoor recreation industry. **When we surveyed small business owners in 32 towns along the CDT last fall, 88% of them reported economic growth in their community over the last five years that was specifically due to use of the trail.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, 98 % stated they wanted to see the CDT completed.** And this isn't isolated to those we think of as working in the "outdoor" industry, for while some of those surveyed own hotels or gear shops, others are graphic designers, healthcare providers, even barbers and auto mechanics.

Completing the CDT invests in the outdoor recreation economy that is the powerhouse for the local economy for many rural rocky mountain west communities, where trail visitors spend money in town, leading to growth in jobs, new businesses, and new opportunities to revitalize

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<sup>1</sup> Continental Divide Trail Coalition, Small Business Survey: Fall 2019, <https://continentaldivide-trail.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Small-Business-Survey-WEB.pdf>

historic downtowns, like in Anaconda, Montana. Completion benefits public health, like in Cuba, New Mexico, where the town sidewalks and trails are being linked to the CDT, so community members have places to walk and bike which helps combat preventable diseases like heart disease and diabetes, which were prevalent in the community just 10 years ago. Completion cultivates the next generation of land and water stewards by creating more opportunities for youth of all backgrounds, like those on a youth conservation crew working along the CDT on the Montana-Idaho border, to explore educational and professional opportunities in the outdoors. All that is to say, completion is not just about the trail - it's about the holistic benefits and creating a culture around all the CDT experience has to offer, and continues to keep connections to one of the most important landscapes of the North American Continent thriving.

Completion of the CDT is making good on the promise Congress made over four decades ago to the American Public when you designated the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail. It will ensure a safer, nationally significant and more enjoyable experience for all to access the natural, historical, and cultural features that can be found along the CDT. It will demonstrate that stewardship of public lands is also an investment in the communities that depend on them. Last but not least, this legislation has a unique opportunity to define a new model for shared stewardship that may be implemented in a more equitable and just way not just for the CDT, but across all of our nations Trails, waters, forests, parks and special places.

Because you see, completing the CDT is not just about closing the gaps - it's about the holistic benefits and creating a culture around all the Continental Divide and the Trail along its spine has to offer, and ensuring connections to one of the most important landscapes of the North American Continent exists for future generations to come.

Thank you for your time today, and for your consideration of this important, historic piece of legislation.