

Colorado Wilderness Act 2019

Prepared Remarks & Testimony

- Thank you so much, Madam Chair, for having this hearing today.
- As you all know, earlier this year I reintroduced the most recent version of the Colorado Wilderness Act, a bill I have introduced each Congress for the two last decades.
- This bill was originally conceived by a coalition of Colorado citizens who are committed, as I am, to protecting the few remaining wild places in our state.
- I do not need to tell you that many Coloradans from Carbondale to Colorado Springs, from Denver to Durango, live in our state because of the very special outdoor heritage that we have.
- The bill before us today, the Colorado Wilderness Act of 2019, protects some of the most cherished and unique areas in our state.
- The soaring beauty of these areas is appreciated by all who travel to visit them.
- The legislation also protects many of our states most cherished prehistoric sites, which include petroglyphs and ancient Pueblo ruins, particularly in southwest Colorado.
- Many of the lands in my bill are lower lying canyon areas, foothills and lower elevation terrain.
- This type of landscape is not well represented among Colorado's current wilderness areas because almost all of the existing wilderness in Colorado is above 9,000 feet in elevation.
- Part of the reason we don't have lower lying canyon areas in our wilderness inventory now is because the original Wilderness Act that Congress passed did not include BLM lands.

- Beginning in 1976 BLM was directed by the Federal Land Policy Management Act to undertake the process of inventorying lands in Colorado and elsewhere to determine their suitability for wilderness.
- In 1991, the BLM presented its final list of Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs).
- From then on, almost 30 years ago, these areas have been managed as wilderness to preserve their natural characteristics.
- About two-thirds, 21 of 33 areas, of the bill we are talking about today consist of areas that BLM currently manages as Wilderness Study Areas.
- Those areas amount to 43% of the of all wilderness areas listed in the legislation.
- After the WSAs were designated, a group of dedicated citizens took it upon themselves to review and inventory the areas that BLM had recommended and to suggest additional areas that might have outstanding wilderness characteristics, the first of which was concluded in 1994.
- These citizen inventories were conducted by volunteers who spent countless hours on the ground mapping and looking at areas that merited wilderness designation.
- Since then, they continued to review and inventory wilderness-quality areas, with the most recent being completed in 2017
- Over the years public meetings have been held across western Colorado seeking input on the proposal, and as a result of those efforts a revised citizen proposal was published in 2001, and another in 2007.
- My goal throughout this process has been to focus on those areas that are most deserving of protection.

- We have done this in consultation with local citizens, other Members of Congress, and local elected officials.
- I have also made significant changes, Madam Chair, to the legislative language over time. For example, I removed the Federal reserve water right that was in earlier versions of the bill, and I made specific boundary adjustments as a result of direct local input.
- The current bill would leave unaffected over 90 percent of BLM-managed lands which would remain open to oil and gas drilling, mining, off-road vehicle use, and other development.
- The areas in the bill represent a little over one percent of Colorado's land or about three percent of all federal land in Colorado.
- When added to the existing wilderness areas, less than six percent of Colorado land would be set aside for this highest level of protection.
- Since I introduced the first version of this bill I have personally traveled the state, visiting many of the areas by foot, horse and raft. On those trips, I was joined by landowners, ranchers, business leaders, elected officials, and many others.
- I have also held a number of public meetings and discussions on the proposal, soliciting feedback from all interested parties.
- My proposal has received significant local support over the last decade. It has been endorsed by 350 businesses and organizations from across the state, as well as 14 Colorado counties and municipalities have expressed their support for wilderness since I first introduced this bill.
- Increased pressures on the public lands have made it even more important to preserve our few remaining wild places, and I believe that it is not contradictory to both preserve wilderness and other types of public lands use.

- For all of these reasons, over 70 percent of Coloradans supported additional wilderness designation in the latest statewide poll, including majorities in all parts of the state and from both political parties.
- 73 percent of the people who live on the western slope of Colorado, where most of these lands occur, supported more wilderness.
- Not only does the public overwhelmingly support this proposal, but it is smart economics policy too.
- According to a 2012 Headwaters Economics report, protecting our western public lands is a boon to rural economies.
- According to the report, from 1970 to 2010, in non-metro western counties with more than 30% of county land having federal protected status, job growth increased by 345%.
- This is because the outdoor recreation economy in Colorado is a direct beneficiary of these protected lands.
- According to the Outdoor Industry Association, the outdoor recreation economy generates 229,000 direct jobs in Colorado.
- That is four times as many jobs as the oil and gas industry and mining industry combined.
- That leads to \$9.7 billion in wages and salaries.
- \$28 billion in consumer spending annually.
- And over \$2 billion in state and local tax revenue.
- The economic benefits of protecting our public lands cannot be understated.
- This bill, Madam Chair, has seen two decades of work from me and my staff and from the many citizens statewide who have been involved.

- The proposed areas have been reviewed and inventoried by the BLM, the Forest Service, and local citizens for even longer. But Madam Chairwoman, I recognize that today's hearing is not the end of the process.
- I look forward to continuing to work with local residents and leaders, and all of the Members of the Congressional Delegation going forward to continue to refine this proposal, and I welcome the feedback and input of today's hearing.
- Our public lands are valued for many reasons, for motorized recreation and resource extraction, to their ability to find solitude and unblemished landscapes. But I strongly believe, Madame Chair, that we must conserve a small portion of those very most special public lands for future generations. Thank you.