

Testimony of Congressman Jared Polis
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
H.R. 643, the Sugar Loaf Fire Protection District Land Exchange Act of 2011

May 4, 2011

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment in support of H.R. 643, The Sugar Loaf Fire Protection District Land Exchange Act of 2011.

Let me begin by thanking the Committee for considering this bill, as it did with great unanimity last year thanks to the work of many of the same members and staff here today. That work resulted in both Committee and House passage by a simple voice vote. The unanimity with which the Committee and the House have considered this bill in the past is telling of its foundation in common sense and local community need.

Since the inception of the Sugar Loaf Fire District in 1967, their physical home has been in an existing building on U.S. Forest Service land under a special use permit. Later, a second building was constructed under another special use permit, both in important locations for accessibility to the few central roads in this mountainous area.

While these special use permits have been incredibly valuable the Department must have the autonomy to better self-direct its future and the ability to modernize its facilities. Specifically, many of you may recall that this fire station serves a growing population and has become a community meeting location. Yet, because it is located on federal land, it can't even upgrade its existing facilities to include a bathroom for use by the fire department or during community events.

Last year, John Winchester, a battalion chief with the Sugar Loaf Fire Department, was able to attend the hearing and offer testimony. Unfortunately, he is unable to attend this year, but I would like to enter into the record his written testimony from last year. In his over 20 years with the Department, he has served four terms as fire chief and I hope his expertise on this issue proves valuable in the committee's consideration.

Lastly, a Senate companion bill was marked up last Congress with changes suggested in that hearing by the U.S. Forest Service and the Sugar Loaf Fire Protection District. Specifically, the US Forest Service asked that the 120-day timeline in the legislation be expanded to one year in order to conform with existing laws, and that modifications to the structures wait until after the exchange has taken place. These changes and requests were included in the introduced versions of this bill both last year and this year, and are the same as the bill that passed the committee and full House.

As the bill's sponsor, I hope to work closely with the U.S. Forest Service, the Committee, and the Sugar Loaf Fire Protection District to address future needs, and ensure that this legislation will benefit the Fire District, the Forest Service and the communities they both serve.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to this committee today.