

1 **STATEMENT**
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5 **NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM**
6 **FOREST SERVICE**
7 **UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT of AGRICULTURE**
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9 **BEFORE THE**
10 **SUBCOMMITTEE ON**
11 **NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS**
12 **COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES**
13 **U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**
14 **MARCH 11, 2010**
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16 **CONCERNING:**
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18 **H.R. 4289, Colorado Wilderness Act of 2009**
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20 Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity today to
21 provide the Department's view on H.R. 4289, the Colorado Wilderness Act of 2009.
22 I am Chris Brown, Director of the Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers Programs for
23 the USDA Forest Service.
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25 Wilderness--those lands designated by Congress possessing truly special characteristics
26 and beauty--is a part of our uniquely American heritage. The management of these lands
27 is a duty the United States Forest Service takes very seriously. I am proud to lead a
28 national program that manages well over half of the Federal land units designated for
29 wilderness.
30
31 H.R. 4289 would designate 34 parcels of federal land in Colorado—comprising 850,134
32 acres—as new components of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS).
33 Some of these parcels would be stand-alone wilderness areas, and some would expand

existing wilderness areas. Most of the federal land addressed by this Act—about 615,000 acres—is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The Department defers to the Department of the Interior in regards to the proposal to designate BLM lands.

A total of about 218,000 acres, lying in 14 of the 34 parcels identified in the Act, include National Forest System (NFS) lands. All 14 parcels also have public land administered by BLM contiguous to the NFS lands. I also want to state how proud we are to partner with the BLM on managing some of our nation’s most treasured lands.

The proposed legislation would designate 13 of the 14 areas having National Forest System Lands as components of the National Wilderness Preservation System upon enactment. The parcels are Badger Creek, Beaver Creek, Browns Canyon, and Grape Creek on the Pike and San Isabel National Forests; the Flat Tops Addition and Thompson Creek on the White River National Forest; Norwood Canyon, Roubideau, West Elk Addition and Unaweep on the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests (GMUG); Sewemup Mesa on the Manti-LaSal and GMUG; Snaggletooth on the San Juan National Forest; and Handies Peak on the Rio Grande, San Juan, and GMUG. In addition, Deep Creek, on the White River National Forest, is identified as a “Potential Wilderness Area.”

Evaluation of Proposed Wilderness Areas

We have not completed an extensive review of each of the proposed areas. However, during the development or revision of a forest land and resource management plan (LRMP), each national forest conducts a thorough evaluation of potential wilderness or

wilderness study areas to assure recommendations fully satisfy the definition of wilderness found in section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act of 1964. Extensive public involvement and input from many interested user groups goes into the development of these plans. They are the foundation by which we evaluate any proposal related to our national forests. Many of the areas cited in this bill were not recommended for wilderness designation in their respective forest plans. An initial assessment of the parcels show them falling into 3 distinct categories: areas we support with minimal adjustment or change, some that merit further discussion and modification; and some we feel different management options or designations would be more appropriate to best balance the interests of our many user groups and fulfill our multiple use mission. We respectfully ask to work with the committee and the bill's sponsor, Representative DeGette, to address these concerns.

NFS Proposed Wilderness Areas on the White River National Forest

The Department supports wilderness designation of 830 acres of the 16,392 acres in the Flat Tops Addition Proposed Wilderness Area, as recommended in the White River National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (2002). The remaining acres would present management problems, such as a cherry-stemmed road intersecting the middle of the area that would encourage the spread of unauthorized motorized trails; a developed campsite; a private resort development directly adjacent to the proposed wilderness; and frequent snowmobile use.

79 The Department supports wilderness designation of Assignment Ridge, an area
80 comprising 11,752 acres of the 17,114 acres in the Thompson Creek Proposed
81 Wilderness Area, as recommended in the White River Land and Resource Management
82 Plan. The Braderich Trail, heavily used by mountain bikers, lies within the proposed
83 wilderness boundary. Adjusting the western boundary to reflect the forest plan
84 recommendation would exclude the trail from wilderness, and allow the continuation of
85 mountain biking opportunities while minimizing concern about mechanized trespass.
86 Leasable minerals, three oil and gas leases, and adjacent private lands needing wildland
87 urban interface fuels treatments are additional concerns that argue for limiting the
88 proposed wilderness area to that recommended in the forest plan.

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90 The Department does not support “Potential Wilderness” designation for the 16,392-acre
91 NFS portion of the Deep Creek Proposed Wilderness Area. The White River National
92 Forest Land and Resource Management Plan specifies that Deep Creek be managed for
93 wild and scenic river objectives pending completion of an ongoing joint BLM/FS
94 suitability study. If, as a result of this study, the river is determined suitable, we would
95 be pleased to support its addition to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System
96 (WSRS).

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98 The Act specifies that the Deep Creek area would be designated wilderness “upon the
99 Secretary publishing in the Federal Register a notice that all nonconforming uses... have
100 ceased.” The non-conforming uses relate to High-Altitude Aviation Training Site
101 (HAATS) activities (aerial navigation training maneuver exercises) that occur in this area

under a memorandum of understanding (MOU) among the Colorado Army National Guard, Forest Service, and BLM. It should be noted that the correct date of this MOU is November 19, 2007, not August 4, 1987.

The Act specifies that HAATS exercises may continue under the MOU, but the MOU and associated operating plan shall be reviewed by the parties not later than 180 days after enactment of Act, and annually thereafter. The review is to include consideration of alternative locations for HAATS activities on NFS lands or lands administered by the BLM, other than designated wilderness or potential wilderness areas.

NFS Proposed Wilderness Areas on the Pike and San Isabel National Forests

The Department supports designation of the Browns Canyon Proposed Wilderness Area. However, we are concerned that the Act would allow continued motorized use of the Turret Road. The road extends 3.25 miles from the proposed wilderness boundary into the heart of the proposed area, virtually bisecting it. This use is problematic for several reasons: some motorized users are driving off the road, creating a system of informal trails that damage vegetation and soil, and disturb wildlife; motorized use creates noise that is inconsistent with wilderness character; and motorized use complicates management of the area for wilderness. Therefore, we suggest that the road be closed to motorized use at Green Gulch, on the border of the proposed wilderness area.

The Department would like to further discuss designation of the 14,696 acres in the Badger Creek Proposed Wilderness Area. 14,440 acres are inventoried roadless acres.

The remaining acres contain motorized roads that would complicate management. We therefore would suggest adjusting the boundary of the proposed wilderness area.

The Department would also like to further discuss designation of the Beaver Creek Proposed Wilderness Area. This 4,326-acre area is classified as inventoried roadless with no non-conforming uses. However, there are concerns that designating this area as wilderness could inhibit our ability to actively fight fire in the wildland urban interface.

The Department does not support designation of the 16,913-acre Grape Creek Proposed Wilderness Area. Much of the proposed area is a network of motorized roads that would not offer a true wilderness experience. Other nonconforming uses include power transmission lines and pipelines under special-use permit.

At the same time there is a smaller portion of this area-5,866 inventoried roadless acres known as West Tanner Peak-that we feel would merit further consideration. The westernmost portion of the Tanner Peak area, adjacent to BLM lands, makes a more manageable topographic boundary and would exclude motorized trails.

NFS Proposed Wilderness Areas on the Rio Grande, San Juan and Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests (GMUG)

The Handies Peak Proposed Wilderness Area has a number of uses that would not conform to the Wilderness Act and that could complicate its management as wilderness. Wager Gulch is a heavily used motorized corridor on the east side of the proposed

wilderness area; numerous roads would encourage motorized trespass. Moreover, a land exchange in Wager Gulch is currently being analyzed. Mountain bike use occurs in the Cuba Gulch area, and there is a private in-holding. The Hard Rock 100 foot race also crosses a portion of the area. We do not support wilderness designation for this area.

NFS Proposed Wilderness on the GMUG

The Norwood Canyon Proposed Wilderness Area has a number of nonconforming uses, including existing and pending oil and gas leases; a power line; past and planned forest management treatments, plantations and fuel treatment projects; and a four-mile cherry stem that would complicate management as wilderness. We do not support wilderness designation of this area.

The NFS portion of the Roubideau Proposed Wilderness Area adjoins the BLM's Roubideau Wilderness Study Area. This 2,161 acre parcel has no motorized or nonconforming uses. Rather than discussing the merits of this smaller parcel, we would like to be involved in any future discussions regarding the designation of the entire Roubideau Wilderness Area.

The Department does not support designation of the 39,392-acre Unaweep Proposed Wilderness Area. Most of this area has a number of nonconforming uses including motorized use, extensive vegetation management (pinyon, juniper, and oakbrush), timber harvest, mechanical fuels treatments, water transportation ditches, and reservoirs.

The Department would like to further discuss designation of the West Elk Addition Proposed Wilderness Area. Currently the West Elk Wilderness is managed as a single-unit by the GMUG. The proposed addition comprises lands adjacent to it that are managed by the Forest Service, BLM, and National Park Service. The complexity of managing the proposed addition could be reduced by consolidating management of the federal lands in the proposed addition under one agency. It should be noted that the proposed area was identified in the Final Resource Protection Study/EIS for the Curecanti National Recreation Area (NRA) (August 2008) as land to be added to the NRA .

Manti-LaSal and GMUG National Forests

The Sewemup Mesa Proposed Wilderness Area straddles the state line of Colorado and Utah. There are old uranium mines at the lower end of Roc Creek, and uranium and active oil and gas leases within the proposed wilderness. Limited public access and uncontrolled motorized traffic would also pose significant problems. We do not support the proposed wilderness designation of Sewemup Mesa.

San Juan National Forest

The Snaggletooth Proposed Wilderness Area has a large number of nonconforming uses, including 27 oil and gas leases, roads that are used for recreation and permitted uses, active uranium mine claims, potash prospecting permits, timber treatments, wildlife habitat improvements, and fuels treatments. We do not support the proposed wilderness designation for this area.

193 **Summary**

194 In summary, some of the proposed areas in this bill merit wilderness designation or at
195 least, further discussion. However, many of the parcels cited in the bill have a variety of
196 conflicting uses and human impacts that are inconsistent with wilderness character. We
197 want to work with the Committee to take a close look at some of the proposed wilderness
198 areas to identify these nonconforming uses in detail and adjust boundaries, where
199 possible, to identify manageable areas that include the highest-value wilderness
200 characteristics. In addition, we strongly support the water provisions in the Act, which
201 state that the Secretary shall obtain and exercise water rights pursuant to the laws of the
202 State of Colorado for federal purposes necessary for wilderness and wilderness uses.

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204 This concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may
205 have.