

**Statement of
Marcilynn A. Burke
Deputy Director
Bureau of Land Management
Department of the Interior
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
H.R. 4289, Colorado Wilderness Act
March 11, 2010**

Thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior to testify on H.R. 4289, the Colorado Wilderness Act. The Department strongly supports the constructive resolution of public lands and wilderness designation issues in Colorado and across the western United States. Enactment of the Omnibus Public Land Management Act (Public Law 111-11) last year provided resolution of wilderness issues for a wide array of lands in California, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Oregon and Utah.

The scope of H.R. 4289 is vast; covering over 615,000 acres of lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The BLM has not undertaken a detailed analysis and review of each of the many areas proposed for wilderness designation. Such a review would require detailed mapping by the BLM and a careful look at a myriad of land use issues including: wilderness quality, boundary manageability, and conflicts with current uses, including motorized recreation and energy development.

As always, we welcome the opportunity to work cooperatively with the sponsor of the legislation, the Committee, and all members of the Colorado delegation on wilderness issues in Colorado. However, we suggest an approach that utilizes a narrower geographical focus.

Our Nation's wilderness system includes many of our most treasured landscapes and ensures that these untrammeled lands and resources are conserved with these outstanding wilderness characteristics intact as they are passed down from one generation of Americans to the next. Through our wilderness decisions, we demonstrate a sense of stewardship and conservation that is uniquely American and is sensibly balanced with the other decisions we make that affect public lands.

Background

The Department strongly supports the constructive resolution of public lands and wilderness designation issues in Colorado and across the Western United States. The Omnibus Public Land Management Act (P.L. 111 -11) signed by the President a year ago, added to America's treasured landscapes and included designation in Colorado of the 66,000-acre Dominguez Canyon Wilderness Area within a larger 210,000-acre National Conservation Area (NCA). In January of this year, we testified in support of designating 8,600 acres as the McKenna Peak Wilderness in San Miguel County, Colorado. Both of these proposals are the result of consensus and cooperation, bringing together all interested parties to the debate.

The BLM understands that numerous citizen volunteers have spent countless hours combing the cliffs, valleys, canyons, and mountains of western Colorado, and have contributed to the proposal before us. These individuals care deeply about the land and its protection, and we share that commitment.

H.R. 4289

Colorado's treasured landscapes are recognized for their powerful impact on the human spirit and are a source of inspiration. The BLM is committed to managing wildlands responsibly in the context of our multiple-use mission. H.R. 4289 proposes to designate 34 wilderness units on BLM-managed lands and U.S. Forest System lands, totaling nearly 850,000 acres, adding them to the National Wilderness Preservation System. These designations are largely focused in western Colorado. These include spectacular canyons, vast open spaces, unique habitat, diverse wildlife, and nationally significant cultural resource sites. The DOI defers to the U.S. Department of Agriculture regarding proposed designations on National Forest System lands.

Many of the areas proposed for designation by H.R. 4289 have important wilderness values and deserve protection. I would like to highlight three areas where existing uses and land management are well-suited to wilderness designation.

Known for its spectacular beauty, the proposed Palisade Wilderness contains nearly 27,000 acres of remarkable scenery and varied plant and wildlife species. The Palisade itself is an iconic fin—a three-mile rocky spine slicing through the area. A 12-mile cliff line with steep slopes characterizes the southern area of the proposed wilderness and deep rugged canyons dominate the eastern areas. Extraordinary backcountry hiking and backpacking provide challenges to experienced travelers. The North Fork of West Creek and West Creek waterways running through the Palisade area exhibit unusually high species diversity and density, and are eligible for Wild and Scenic River designation.

The proposed Castle Peak Wilderness consists of over 16,000 acres of steep rugged slopes, rolling hills, deep basins, and sprawling meadows. The region is home to a vibrant assortment of wildlife, including elk, deer, black bear, mountain lion, bobcat, and raptors. Hunting and fishing are popular activities in the area and are consistent with wilderness designation.

The proposed Browns Canyon Wilderness is one of rugged beauty, colorful outcroppings, and abundant wildlife. The 3,000-foot deep canyon along the Arkansas River forms the western boundary of the proposed wilderness. From there the land climbs dramatically to an elevation of 10,000 feet to the east. While a single ecosystem, the land is divided administratively. The BLM manages the western portion, including the canyon, while the Forest Service manages the eastern portion. A significant herd of bighorn sheep resides within Browns Canyon, and it is an important winter range for deer and elk. Views from the area across the Arkansas Valley to the 14,000-foot peaks of the Collegiate Range are among the most spectacular in Colorado. The Arkansas River is one of this country's most popular white water rafting destinations, with more than 300,000 visitors floating it annually. Nearly half of these visitors float the nationally renowned Browns Canyon segment, which is adjacent to the proposed wilderness but is not included in the proposed wilderness.

There are also several areas proposed for wilderness designation under H.R. 4289 where conflicts with existing and proposed uses make manageability as wilderness problematic. Recreational use has exploded on public lands throughout the West, including in Colorado. While many recreational activities, such as hunting, fishing, and hiking are compatible with wilderness designation, others, such as mountain biking and off-highway vehicle use, are not. Some of the areas proposed for wilderness designation contain popular motorized or mechanized recreation areas.

The proposed Bangs Canyon Wilderness is bisected by the nationally recognized Tabeguache Trail. Almost 9 miles of the 142-mile Tabeguache Trail connecting Grand Junction and Montrose pass through the area proposed for wilderness designation. This trail receives about 30,000 visitors annually and accommodates both mountain bikes and motorized recreationists, both of which are incompatible with wilderness designation. Approximately 8,000 of the acres of the proposed wilderness are managed by the BLM for these mechanized and motorized uses. The BLM manages approximately 13,000 acres of the “heart” of the proposed wilderness (Bangs Canyons East and West) as a back-country primitive area.

Existing and proposed energy development pose inherent conflicts with wilderness designations, creating the challenge of managing extensive active mining claims and oil and gas leases within a designated wilderness. For example, all 27,569 acres of the proposed South Shale Ridge Wilderness are currently leased under 44 leases for oil and gas and include 11 producing wells. This area, part of the Piceance Basin, has been identified by the BLM as an oil and gas emphasis area for over 20 years.

Likewise, nearly half of the proposed Snaggletooth Wilderness is currently under lease for oil and gas development, with 27 leases existing within the area. Active uranium mining is also currently underway within this area.

Similarly the proposed Table Mountain Wilderness includes over 300 active mining claims (largely for uranium). An extensive network of 47 miles of primitive roads supporting uranium exploration crisscrosses the area.

Conclusion

The Department of the Interior looks forward to future opportunities to expand the protection of treasured American landscapes. Colorado’s exquisite deserts, canyons, cliffs, and peaks deserve our careful attention and thoughtful review. However, we recommend an approach more limited in scope so that we can assure proper review and consultation. Working cooperatively with local and national constituencies, this subcommittee, the sponsor of the bill, and the Colorado Congressional delegation, we can protect these special places.