

Testimony of Patti Clapper  
Chair, Pitkin County Board of County Commissioners

Before the  
U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health  
concerning H.R. 1129, the "Pitkin County Land Exchange Act of 2005"

July 14, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee,

I thank you for holding this hearing today on H.R. 1129, which would direct a land exchange of longstanding interest to the residents of Pitkin County, and benefit the millions of people who visit our County and the White River National Forest each year. My name is Patti Clapper, and I am the Chair of the Pitkin County Board of County Commissioners.

Mr. Chairman, H.R. 1129 has its roots in efforts which the Forest Service and residents of our County initiated many years ago to implement the Ashcroft Preservation Project to protect the upper end of Castle Creek Valley, which rivals many National Parks for its scenic splendor, and year-round recreational activity. Those lands are located in and around the historic Ashcroft town site at the end of Aspen's Castle Creek Valley. The valley is ringed with snowcapped peaks and contains one of the most popular wilderness areas in our nation. They are particularly valued for their scenery, Nordic skiing, access to the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness Area, and historic sites associated with the famous World War II 10th Mountain Division. This valley floor was privately owned until the early nineteen eighties, when the USFS began a series of land acquisitions to protect the area in public ownership. Unfortunately, one keystone parcel of 35 acres slipped through the cracks, and that was the Ryan parcel that is the subject of H.R. 1129.

The driving force behind this legislation is the interest of both Pitkin County and the U.S. Forest Service to allow the Forest Service to finally acquire the Ryan Property. Five and a half years ago, at the written request of the Forest Service, Pitkin County and the Aspen Valley Land Trust purchased the Ryan Property at a cost of over \$3 million, in order to protect it from private development and to hold it until the Forest Service could finalize a land exchange with Pitkin County. At that time, we were promised by the White River National Forest Supervisor that a land exchange would be accomplished quickly, and the Forest Service even identified a parcel, known as the "Devaney Parcel," to exchange to us.

Unfortunately, the land exchange has languished since that time due to numerous changes in Forest Service personnel, and the Forest Service's change of mind and decision to retain the Devaney parcel, and offer us other lands instead. After examining several alternative parcels which the Forest Service asked us to consider, and finding that they had problems which prevented their disposal to us, we agreed to have them convey to us the Wildwood Parcel which is clouded by a title dispute that has simmered for over 40 years. In summary, what H.R. 1129 provides is that Pitkin County will clear title to the Wildwood parcel so that the Forest Service can convey it to us. That will help us recoup part of the money Pitkin County and the Aspen Valley Land Trust spent to acquire and hold the Ryan Parcel for them. While it is not yet clear how all of these parcels will appraise, it is likely that the Ryan Parcel will be valued higher than the federal lands now offered to us. To accomplish this exchange, Pitkin County is prepared to ask our voters for permission to donate land value to the United States in the exchange.

Mr. Chairman, from a conservation perspective, this is a great land exchange for all parties concerned, and it has been structured to absolutely insure that the public will benefit from its land consolidation, management efficiency, and natural resource protection features. If you have questions about how the exchange will work, Mr. Dale Will, our County Open Space Director, is here with me to address those technical issues. We also have a request for a small language change in the bill regarding the appraisal of the Wildwood parcel which we would be happy to discuss with you or your staff.

In closing, please allow me to note that not only is this exchange endorsed by Pitkin County, Forest Service and BLM, but also by our U.S. Senators Wayne Allard and Ken Salazar who have introduced a companion measure in S. 100, and by the City of Aspen, the Aspen Skiing Company, Aspen Center for Environmental Studies, Aspen Historical Society, the Conservation

Fund, the Crystal Valley Environmental Protection Association, the Castle-Maroon Caucus, the Friends of Ashcroft, the Roaring Fork Conservancy, the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society and the Wilderness Workshop. In addition, your predecessor as Chairman, Mr. McInnis, introduced a similar bill late last fall. Therefore, this is a truly a bipartisan and consensus proposal.

Lastly, I would like to submit a short chronology of efforts to protect the Ryan parcel, and of the Ashcroft Preservation Project overall, and I would ask that this be included in the Congressional Record regarding this legislation.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify at this hearing. We hope H.R. 1129 can be moved forward expeditiously.

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