

TESTIMONY OF BILL DVOŘÁK
PRESIDENT
DVOŘÁK RAFTING & FISHING EXPEDITIONS
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MARCH 11, 2010

Good morning Chairman Grijalva and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Bill Dvořák and I am President of my own outfitting company, Dvořák Rafting & Fishing Expeditions. I am here today to talk about the benefits of wilderness designation in Colorado for businesses like mine.

I have been an outfitter since 1975, and have the privilege of holding the first-issued River Recreation Outfitter license, serial number 001. Since 1984, I have co-owned an outfitting business, and am proud to say that our business has grown to be one of Colorado's most respected outfitters. I have served on the Board of Directors for some of the outfitting industry's leading organizations, including the Colorado River Outfitters Association, and America Outdoors. I have also been a member of the Colorado Tourism Board, and was elected as the recreational representative to the Colorado Travel and Tourism Authority for 3 terms.

My company leads rafting trips on 9 different rivers in 5 different states, as well as international trips to New Zealand and Nepal. We employ about 30 to 40 guides and support staff. We have also been honored by National Geographic Adventure Magazine as one of the 10 best river-oriented adventure travel companies in the world.

Colorado has a vibrant recreation culture and economy. In addition to my own outfitting company, there are dozens of others throughout the state. Colorado is also home to hundreds of outdoor gear manufacturers and retail goods shops that rely on customers who love the outdoors.

These businesses mean jobs for Coloradans. The tourism sector employs 144,000 people in Colorado, making tourism one of the largest industries in the state. In 2008, the total amount spent in the state from tourists was \$15.3 billion. Commercial rafting alone contributes about \$140 million annually to Colorado's economy, while providing river trips to around 500,000 people.

As an outfitter, my livelihood is based on having protected land and rivers in which to raft, fish, and paddle. We have the benefit of operating in a state with truly remarkable natural assets. But many of areas are under growing pressures from increased demands on our public lands. Wilderness designation is one of the vital tools the federal government has to set aside some of our most cherished land for low-impact recreation.

Colorado's wilderness areas are one of the potent draws for both in-state and out-of-state recreation. When an area is designated as wilderness, this raises its profile and acts as a draw to recreationalists from across the country. Expanding wilderness in Colorado would help the rafting and tourism industries grow, and would create new jobs in the outdoor industry.

Wilderness is valuable for many non-economic reasons as well. Wilderness areas serve as sanctuaries for wildlife of all kinds. As private land across Colorado is seeing more development and population growth, our public lands serve as the final refuge for many species. The Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP), based out of Colorado State University, has assembled the most complete data of critical areas for sensitive species and natural communities in Colorado. Based on this data, the CNHP ranks areas in Colorado depending on how important the habitat is to biodiversity. Many of the areas in the Colorado Wilderness Act of 2009 rank highly on the CNHP maps. For example, the proposed Sewemup Mesa, Palisade, Handies Peak, South Shale Ridge, and West Elk Addition Wilderness Areas all contain areas classified as having Outstanding Biodiversity Significance – the most critical need category.

This bill focuses on many of the landscapes that matter most to me – low-lying canyon lands that provide outstanding opportunities for rafting, fishing and paddling. These areas are not well represented in our current wilderness areas in Colorado. Almost all of the wilderness areas in Colorado are high-elevation alpine areas. This bill proposes to protect some of our outstanding low elevation lands, which provide unique opportunities for recreation and are no less striking in their beauty and wilderness character.

I am very familiar with many of the proposed wilderness areas in this bill. My company actively leads rafting trips every year on several of the rivers protected by the bill. For example, we run the Dolores River, which is my personal favorite river trip and my only true claim to fame. I have more runs of the class 4-5 Snaggletooth Rapid than any other person. My record in a day was 17 runs, 12 kayaks and 5 rafts.

I have floated through the proposed Dolores River Canyon, Sewemup Mesa, Palisade, and Snaggletooth areas. The Dolores River runs through pristine desert areas containing some of the most outstanding canyon scenery in Colorado. In some areas, the cliffs rise 700 feet above the water. In my opinion the float through Slickrock Canyon is the prettiest slickrock canyon trip in the Southwest. I would rate a 5-6 day Dolores River trip as one of the 3 best trips in the lower 48, right up there with the Grand Canyon and the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in Idaho. Rafting on the Dolores also provided over \$150,000 in economic impact in 2009, with over 500 user days. I'm proud to say that my company usually has more commercial use on the Dolores than all other outfitters combined.

My company also leads trips down the Colorado River, near the proposed Bull Gulch wilderness area. While the Bull Gulch proposal does not include the Colorado River itself, it would protect the remarkable landscape above the river, including golden aspen, dark green spruce, and cliffs of blinding white sandstone.

The area I care about most deeply, though, is Browns Canyon, along the Arkansas River in Chaffee County. It lies just in front of my home and is our bread and butter river. Almost one-third of my trips through Browns Canyon are wilderness camping, multi-day trips. The main attraction or selling point for these trips is the true wilderness aspect of camping in that area.

Browns Canyon is one of the last pristine canyons in the state. The area includes important habitat for elk, deer, eagles, hawks, coyotes, bear, bighorn sheep, mountain lions, and bobcats. I've even seen a few antelope in there. It provides needed sanctuary for all these critters. It is a stunning landscape with picturesque vistas and rugged rock outcroppings.

Browns Canyon is also one of the most popular rafting rivers in the state. In 2009, there were over 200,000 user days on the river, generating over \$60 million in economic benefit. The rafting run at Browns Canyon is 16 miles of challenging Class II and Class III rapids slicing through beautiful, solid pink granite. Protection of the remarkable wild country surrounding the river canyon would be a boon to our vital rafting business along the river and would help protect a truly magical place.

I am not alone in wanting Browns Canyon to be protected. In addition to Representative DeGette's efforts, bills to protect Browns Canyon have been introduced by former Senator Ken Salazar, former Senator Wayne Allard, and former Representative Joel Hefley. When Representative Hefley introduced legislation in the 109th Congress to protect Browns Canyon, his bill was co-sponsored by every Colorado member of the House of Representatives. Wilderness protection of the Canyon has also been endorsed by dozens of local and statewide organizations and businesses, as well as *The Denver Post*.

In sum, I am a strong supporter of new wilderness in Colorado. Wilderness protection will increase tourism, create jobs, and will preserve some of the most special areas in our state for future generations. I have spoken in favor of wilderness protections for many years in Colorado, and appreciate the opportunity to speak to Congress about the importance of protecting the areas proposed in this bill. Thank you for having me here today and I'll be glad to answer any questions you may have.