

TESTIMONY OF

THE HONORABLE BETSEY HALE
COMMISSIONER
MONTROSE COUNTY, COLORADO

ON BEHALF OF

MONTROSE COUNTY, COLORADO
COLORADO COUNTIES, INC.
&
THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION
& PUBLIC LANDS

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MAY 7, 2002

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, my name is Betsey Hale, and I am a county commissioner in Montrose County, Colorado. I am here today representing my community of Montrose County, Colorado Counties, Inc. and the National Association of Counties (NACo).

We strongly support the principles underlying the Gateway Communities Cooperation Act of 2002. In fact, our American County Platform reads, in relevant part:

NACo, its Western Interstate Region, state associations of counties and individual county governments have a critical role to play in the policy planning and management of the 775 million acres of federally owned lands. The policies, plans, and activities for federal lands have a great impact on adjacent state and local and private lands. In counties with a high percentage of public lands, federal decisions often dictate social and economic conditions.

NACo believes that the most basic principle that must be followed in all actions by state and federal agencies is consultation with local county officials, as well as municipal and tribal officials, who have been elected to represent the concerns of those directly affected by public land management decisions. NACo encourages county officials to take affirmative steps towards developing appropriate land management strategies and plans and believes that federal agencies must make every effort to create a cooperative policy that is consistent with these local land use plans. Historically, the voice of counties who are directly affected has been largely ignored in the creation of lands policy. Therefore, it is imperative that the federal government work cooperatively with county and other local governments on such policies in the future.

Our experience in Montrose County illustrates the rationale behind NACo's platform language as well as the need for Congress to enact H.R. 4622.

Montrose County is located in southwest Colorado. Sixty-eight percent of our 1,437,712 acres are public lands, including land managed by the State of Colorado, the Bureau of Land Management, the US Forest Service, the Bureau of Reclamation and the National Park Service. While the federal lands are a tremendous asset to the citizens of Montrose in many ways, we find that we are simply unable to be the kinds of partners with the federal land managers that we would like to be.

There are currently eight different land use and management plans being drafted by federal land managers in Montrose County. These eight plans affect the Gateway to the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, the Grand Mesa Uncomphagre National Forest and the Curecanti National Recreation Area. County elected officials, county staff and many of our citizens, as well, are all trying to provide meaningful input to these federal plans in progress. At the same time, we are in the midst of developing a regional wildfire management plan. And we are also working with the Forest Service on a forest restoration partnership which will address forest management in three states. On top of all this, we are in the process of rewriting Montrose County's Master Plan and zoning and subdivision regulations to address the impacts of the thirty-eight percent growth we have experienced over the past ten years. With all this going, Mr. Chairman, our planning and zoning staff are already stretched to the limit just to provide basic service to our citizens.

As you can see, we simply cannot do any more to demonstrate our good faith as partners with the federal land managers. Unfortunately, the multitude of plans being drafted at the moment leaves us feeling overwhelmed, confused and wondering how it all will affect us. We wonder which meetings, open houses, public hearings and work-sessions we should attend. As we are trying to hold down jobs, raise families, eat and even sleep, we worry that decisions are being made by federal land managers that will profoundly affect our livelihoods in agriculture, tourism, forestry or mining.

Furthermore, we know that the decisions we are making on the land under our jurisdiction as county commissioners will affect the resources managed by the federal agencies. Yet, sadly, we fail to collaborate

and communicate on these issues of mutual concern because we are simply overwhelmed by the sheer volume of work being done all around us. This sense of being besieged contributes to an atmosphere of fear and mistrust where there should be cooperation.

We believe that were the provisions of H.R. 4622 to be enacted, our situation would be greatly improved. The requirement for early notice to the officials in gateway communities, as well as the provision of training and technical assistance would be very helpful. Perhaps the most valuable, however, at least from the perspective of Montrose County, is the provision for consolidated and coordinated interagency planning. We would, of course, prefer that the requirement be more stringent than “to the extent practicable” but we strongly support the intent of the bill in this regard and would expect that the agencies would make every effort to comply with the spirit of the law.

Mr. Chairman, as I noted earlier, Montrose County, the counties of Colorado and the National Association of Counties strive to be good partners in the stewardship of the land we all love, particularly those of us in counties which are gateways to the public lands. All we ask is that the federal land managers reciprocate by fulfilling their obligation to be good partners in return. H.R. 4622 is a good step in that direction.