



Written Testimony of:
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Boulder County Board of Commissioners

Submitted to:
U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

Testimony in support of HR 2110: Colorado Northern Front Range Mountain Backdrop Protection Study Act

March 9, 2006

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HR 2110. I am presenting before you today these thoughts on behalf of the Boulder County Board of Commissioners and the community we serve.

We see this bill as an opportunity to lay the groundwork necessary to carefully plan and protect a great natural resource of local and national significance for future generations.

On the Front Range of Colorado over the past two decades we have seen dramatic population growth. For those have lived here all our lives, it's of no great surprise. The Northern Front Range, and I'll speak specifically about Boulder County, is without a doubt one of the great places in our country.

The rapid growth in population has brought great benefit to our region and we are a more vibrant community for it. But growth has also carried with it great challenges. It is no exaggeration to say that recent growth is a direct threat to some of things that are most important to us. Without careful federal, state and local management of our mountainous lands we will see the erosion of the open space values that define our community.

I think it would be difficult to overstate the significance of the undeveloped open space of this mountainous backdrop. It's vital to who we are and to our economic well-being. It's where we hike and bike and climb and find solace from busy lives.

The impacts of development in the mountains are very different from development elsewhere. Homes can require long roads that leave long, visible scars on the mountainsides, disrupt natural habitats and cause erosion damage. They require costly additions of utilities and waste disposal systems which create further impacts on open space and already-developed lands.

It is no stretch to declare that development in the mountains can create significant stresses on natural ecosystems. Ecologists tell us all the time that our greatest danger to wildlife in the backdrop is habitat fragmentation. Given the way the land is currently divided and fragmented, the potential is high for destruction to the natural habitat in this area without proper foresight in protecting and maintaining open space.

It may be worth noting that many private parcels still available for development in this area were originally mining claims – narrow strips of land designed to follow a mineral lode. The result is a very odd pattern of public and private ownership that makes for difficult structural expansion and wildlife conservation if development in the area is not coordinated as part of a comprehensive land management plan.

I also want to mention wildfire danger. Just in the past three weeks we've had three wildfires in Boulder County, each of them too close for comfort for our current property owners. Nowadays, every time the wind blows I brace myself for a call from the Sheriff. The more development we have in certain parts of the backdrop, the more likely we'll have fire, the harder we'll have to work to protect people's lives and their homes, and the more danger we'll place our firefighters in. Fire, of course, results in significant damage to private and public lands, to water quality, to wildlife, and to our local economy.

Also of note, and a reason for our concern today, is that in the last few years continued development pressure and a significantly increased willingness to pay the higher cost of building on remote sites has opened up more difficult-to-build lands for development. We think a study of the open space values of these lands is particularly timely.

This bill is not intended to override existing local planning efforts or impact private property rights. It merely authorizes a study that will provide local governing bodies with the proper tools to make important decisions about the future economic, environmental and cultural health of our region.

As a life-long Coloradoan, I understand the importance of private property rights to westerners. You can't be a county commissioner in Colorado and not appreciate just how important private property rights are to landowners. In fact, I own an undeveloped parcel in the mountains of Boulder County myself. As I understand it, nothing in this bill affects private property rights.

I'm no poet, and there could be many others who could speak more eloquently to the wildlife values, scenic vistas and the myriad reasons of why we are interested in this bill. I just wanted you to know that our entire community cares deeply about the future of the mountainous lands, and we hope you will support this modest step to allow the Forest Service the opportunity to ascertain and suggest ways to preserve the open space qualities of our mountain backdrop.

We look forward to learning from the Forest Service's deep understanding of the land and experience as a land manager, and we welcome greater opportunity to work with the federal government to do something that is clearly in the public interest, both locally and nationally.

Thank you for your time.

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