

Committee on Resources, Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

[forests](#) - - Rep. Scott McInnis, Chairman

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Witness Statement

H.R. 1576

Proposed James Peak Wilderness, Wilderness Study, and Protection Area Act

Testimony Presented to the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

Resources Committee

U.S. House of Representatives

by

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Sierra Club

in behalf of

Colorado Wilderness Network

July 26, 2001

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Subcommittee, for this opportunity to discuss and, frankly, to sing the praises of one of Colorado's spectacular expanses of wild lands.

My name is Steve Smith, and I am Associate Southwest Regional Representative for the Sierra Club, based in Colorado. I am speaking today in behalf of the Colorado Wilderness Network, a coalition of some 200 environmental organizations, trade associations, chambers of commerce, and local governments who support additional wilderness designations in our fine state.

The steering committee for the Colorado Wilderness Network is composed of delegates from Colorado Environmental Coalition, Colorado Mountain Club, Sierra Club, The Wilderness Network, and Western Colorado Congress.

My own background includes a stretch of just over thirty years of environmental advocacy in Colorado. Since completing my undergraduate degree at Colorado State University, with a concentration in

environmental policy studies, I have helped founded or worked for organizations dedicated to wilderness advocacy, recycling services, open space protection, and transportation.

For twelve years concluding in 1999, I was employed as Senior Congressional Assistant to Congressman David Skaggs. During that time, I provided field research, helped draft legislation, and facilitated negotiations among local interest groups that resulted in permanent protection for North St. Vrain Creek and for new wilderness areas designated in the Colorado Wilderness Act of 1993. I provided similar assistance and work in preparing legislative proposals that later led, with the Chairman's able leadership, to wilderness designation for the Spanish Peaks Wilderness. Finally, I convened local negotiations and provided legislative recommendations for the first James Peak wilderness act, introduced by Mr. Skaggs in 1998.

As a result of that latter experience, I learned much about the physical features of the James Peak area and, pleasantly, much about the people who live near and those who enjoy visiting it.

The sweeping alpine tundra, clear pure streams that build from tiny snowmelt trickles to cascading streams, deep old growth forests, and prominent mountain peaks found in the James Peak area compose a quintessential example of America's wilderness. It is a place that readily deserves inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Readily viewed from several highways and back roads, accessible through several convenient trailheads, and yet almost completely untouched -- and certainly undamaged -- by human effects, this is a place that symbolizes Colorado's wealth in beauty while providing a refreshing respite from the pace, noise, and pressures of urban life.

As a legislative means of protecting the rare and remarkable values of the James Peak area, we support support Congressman Udall's H.R. 1576, the proposed James Peak Wilderness, Wilderness Study, and Protection Area Act. Our support for that act is subject to one qualifier, which I will discuss in a moment.

Although the United States Forest Service, in its 1997 Revision of the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests did not recommend the James Peak area for wilderness designation, it did acknowledge the many features of the area that are well suited to wilderness protection. The agency's basis for not recommending the area for wilderness designation comprised entirely a list of human activities and structures that may be seen or heard from selected parts of the area, but no real conflicts within the area.

We assert that sights and sounds from outside an otherwise qualifying area should not be, and historically has not been, used by federal land managers as reason for disqualifying areas for wilderness. The sheer magnitude of the James Peak area -- perhaps Colorado's largest remaining roadless expanse outside designated wilderness -- along with its high elevation, inevitably means that one can see and hear faraway things from inside the area.

These sights and sounds do not, however, alter the fact that the area is without roads, possesses unique geographic features, harbors high quality water sources, provides unique opportunities for solitude and exploration, and -- perhaps most important -- includes no potential for mining, timber harvest, road building, or other developments contrary to wilderness designation.

Whatever one can see or hear from the James Peak area, it remains a wilderness, and it should be recognized as such by Congress.

I mentioned that our support for Congressman Udall's legislation is qualified on one point. That point is the area proposed in the bill as a Wilderness Study Area.

That Grand County portion of the roadless area is no less qualified to be wilderness than are those portions on the east side of the Continental Divide in Boulder, Clear Creek, Gilpin counties. The west side's more sweeping tundra, long valleys, and dark timber provide a perfect counterpoint to the rugged walls, glacial cirques, and high mountain meadows found to the east. Combined, the two sides make up what will be, and should be, a remarkable American wilderness.

We support changes in Congressman Udall's legislation that would designate all of the James Peak roadless area, including that portion in Grand County, as wilderness.

We understand that wilderness for the Grand County portion does not yet enjoy the level of support from local elected officials as is afforded the portions in the other counties, and we have spent many enjoyable hours and many thought conversations trying to better understand the concerns and preferences of those Grand County officials.

Through all those discussions, however, I respectfully assert that we were never presented with any specific instance in which for which the area is not qualified to be wilderness. Rather, local officials have consistently stated their philosophical opposition to the concept of wilderness designations.

If there are specific, physical, on-the-ground conflicts that would disqualify any portion of the James Peak roadless area from being protected as wilderness, we would be the first to propose boundary changes or other adjustments that recognize and accommodate those conflicts. In the absence of such specific problems, however, we find no justification for leaving the west side portion out of wilderness.

Our members have walked and studied the James Peak roadless area extensively. For nearly seven years, we have actively discussed its features, its values, and its potential with all officials and citizens interested in it. We have sought compromise and other approaches to agreement on protecting the largest possible expanse of wilderness there.

To that end, we have helped work out boundary changes and other mapping details, helped forge agreements and language that will accommodate a variety of uses and needs in and near the area, and been consistently available and open to more discussions of the same.

After that effort and those experiences, we are more confident than ever that all of the James Peak area should be proudly designated as an outstanding, glorious addition to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

We urge the Subcommittee to amend this H.R. 1576 to include the roadless lands in Grand County as wilderness, and then to recommend prompt passage of that improved legislation by the Congress.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to present our views on this remarkable place. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.

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