

Statement of Glenn Casamassa
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Before the
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests and Mining
Concerning
S. 2721, the “San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act”
August 22, 2018

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the views of the Department of Agriculture on S. 2721, the “San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act.”

S. 2721 would designate several parcels of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests totaling approximately 22,888 acres as wilderness under the National Wilderness Preservation System. These parcels would be additions to the existing Lizard Head and Mount Sneffels wilderness areas.

S. 2721 would also designate the Sheep Mountain and Liberty Bell East areas as Special Management Areas to be managed to maintain or improve the area’s existing wilderness character for potential inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Additionally, S. 2721 would permanently withdraw 6,590 acres of National Forest System lands in Naturita Canyon on the Uncompahgre National Forest from entry, appropriation, or disposal under the public land laws; location, entry, and patent under the mining laws; and operation under the mineral leasing and geothermal leasing laws.

USDA defers to the Department of the Interior regarding the proposal to designate approximately 8,600 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands as the McKenna Peak Wilderness and the release of the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness Study Area.

We thank Senator Bennet for his collaborative approach and appreciate the local involvement and stakeholder contributions to this bill. The Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests are currently revising their Forest Plan. During the plan revision process, the Forest is working with the public to identify lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System and determine whether to recommend any areas for wilderness designation. Only Congress can designate areas as wilderness, and plan revision, including public involvement, plays an important role in evaluating lands for consideration by Congress. The Forest initiated its wilderness review process in January 2018. The draft wilderness evaluation report and supporting materials were published on August 6th. The draft environmental impact statement is scheduled to be released in the spring of 2019 with a final decision on the Forest Plan, including recommendations for wilderness designation, to be made sometime in the fall of 2020.

Due to this ongoing public process, USDA believes a formal position on wilderness designations would be premature at this time. Specific considerations regarding the current management situation for the wilderness additions and special management areas are as follows.

Lizard Head Wilderness Additions

The Lizard Head Wilderness lies astride the San Miguel Mountains, 10 miles southwest of Telluride on the Uncompahgre and San Juan National Forests. The proposed wilderness additions include five parcels, encompassing approximately 3,141 acres of National Forest System lands adjacent to the existing wilderness. The Forest Plan, completed in 1983, does not recommend any of the areas for wilderness designation. However, wilderness designation would not be inconsistent with the current management of the area. No summer motorized recreation is currently allowed and effects to winter motorized recreation would be minimal as there is little snowmobile use of the area.

Mount Sneffels Wilderness Additions

The Mount Sneffels Wilderness comprises more than 16,500 acres on the Uncompahgre National Forest between the communities of Telluride and Ouray. The proposed wilderness additions include four parcels that encompass approximately 19,747 acres of National Forest System lands adjacent to the existing wilderness. As with the Lizard Head Additions, even though this area was not recommended for wilderness designation in the current Forest Plan, designation is generally aligned with Forest Plan direction and would have minimal effects on summer and winter recreation.

Liberty Bell East Special Management Area

S. 2721 would designate 792 acres of National Forest System lands located north of the town of Telluride as a special management area on the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests.

We would like to work with the sponsor and the subcommittee to address some technical aspects of the bill regarding language to maintain the suitability of the area for potential inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System while still providing for uses such as helicopter access for recreation and the use of bicycles, in the special management area.

Sheep Mountain Special Management Area

S. 2721 would designate 21,675 acres of National Forest System lands located south of the town of Ophir as a special management area. About 10,930 acres are within the Uncompahgre National Forest and 10,745 acres are within the San Juan National Forest. This area contains some lands purchased recently with funds provided by Congress as part of the Ophir Valley Land and Water Conservation Fund project. Currently the Forest Plan identifies half of the area to be managed for semi-primitive non-motorized recreation and the other half for other recreation purposes.

Naturita Canyon Mineral Withdrawal

National Forest System lands that would be withdrawn are within Naturita Canyon on the Uncompahgre National Forest, about five miles south of the community of Norwood. Naturita Canyon is relatively low-elevation river drainage (7,000 feet elevation) with steep canyon walls 1,000 feet in height.

USDA supports domestic energy and mineral production, including critical minerals, as important uses of the NFS. Presidential Executive Orders (EO) 13817, A Federal Strategy to Ensure Secure and Reliable Supplies of Critical Minerals, issued on December 20, 2017 and EO 13783, Promoting Energy Independence and Economic Growth, issued on March 28, 2017 reinvigorates USDA's responsibility to provide access and remove barriers to energy and locatable mineral development, including critical mineral commodities.

USDA's Forest Service stands ready to provide environmental, social, and economic analysis as Congress weighs the important considerations and consequences of permanent withdrawal.

In relation to all of the proposals included in S. 2721, USDA seeks to manage all activities in balance with the other natural resources, values, and economic drivers found on and around the national forests, which include hazardous fuels reduction, forest resiliency, community protection, and rural prosperity.

This concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.