

**Statement of
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**Before the
Energy & Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
United States Senate**

S. 1024, Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act

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Thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior to testify on S. 1024, the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act. The Administration supports S. 1024, which designates two new National Conservation Areas (NCAs) and eight new wilderness areas in Doña Ana County, New Mexico. We welcome this opportunity to enhance protection for some of America's treasured landscapes.

Background

Doña Ana County is many things – the county with the second highest population in New Mexico; home to Las Cruces, one of the fastest growing cities in the country; and a land of amazing beauty. Towering mountain ranges, dramatic deserts, and fertile valleys characterize this corner of the Land of Enchantment. The Organ Mountains, east of the city of Las Cruces, dominate the landscape. Characterized by steep, angular, barren rock outcroppings, the Organ Mountains rise to nearly 9,000 feet in elevation and extend for 20 miles, running generally north and south. This high-desert landscape within the Chihuahuan Desert contains a multitude of biological zones – mixed desert shrubs and grasslands in the lowlands ascending to piñon and juniper woodlands, and finally to ponderosa pines at the highest elevations. Consequently, the area is home to a high diversity of animal life, including peregrine falcons and other raptors, as well as mountain lions and other mammals. Abundant prehistoric cultural sites, dating back 8,000 years, dot the landscape. The Organ Mountains are a popular recreation area, with multiple hiking trails, a popular campground, and opportunities for hunting, mountain biking, and other dispersed recreation.

On the west side of Las Cruces are the mountain ranges and peaks of the Robledo Mountains and Sierra de las Uvas, which make up the Desert Peaks area. These desert landscapes are characterized by numerous mesas and buttes interspersed with deep canyons and arroyos. Mule deer, mountain lions, and golden eagles and other raptors are attracted to this varied landscape. Prehistoric cultural sites of the classic Mimbres and El Paso phases are sprinkled throughout this region along with historic sites associated with more recent settlements. This area is also home to the unusual Night-blooming Cereus – seeing the one-night-a-year bloom in its natural surroundings is a rare delight. Finally, the area provides varied dispersed recreational opportunities.

To the southwest of Las Cruces, near the Mexican border, is the Potrillo Mountains Complex. The geologic genesis of these mountains is different from that of the Organ Mountains and Desert Peaks area. Cinder cones, volcanic craters, basalt lava flows, and talus slopes characterize this corner of Doña Ana County. These lands are famous for their abundant wildlife, and contain significant fossil resources. A well-preserved giant ground sloth skeleton, now housed at Yale University, was discovered in this area. The sheer breadth of these lands and their open, expansive vistas offer remarkable opportunities for solitude.

Senator Bingaman and a wide range of local governments, communities, user groups, conservationists, and Federal agencies have worked collaboratively to develop this consensus proposal to protect all of these special areas.

S. 1024

S. 1024 proposes to designate two new NCAs and eight wilderness areas in Doña Ana County, New Mexico, which would be included in BLM's National Landscape Conservation System. The legislation also releases nearly 31,000 acres from wilderness study area (WSA) status, transfers land from the Department of the Defense (DOD) to the BLM for inclusion within an NCA, and withdraws certain additional lands from disposal, mining, and mineral leasing.

Section 3 of S. 1024 designates eight wilderness areas totaling approximately 241,000 acres. The BLM supports the proposed wilderness designations in S. 1024. We would like the opportunity to work with the Chairman on minor boundary modifications for manageability.

These new wilderness designations are in three distinct areas of the county. First, within the proposed 86,000 acre Organ Mountains NCA, 19,200 acres would be designated as the Organ Mountains Wilderness.

The second area is within the Desert Peaks National Conservation Area proposed in this legislation. The bill proposes three designations in this area: Broad Canyon Wilderness (13,900 acres); Robledo Mountains Wilderness (17,000 acres); and Sierra de las Uvas Wilderness (11,100 acres). These three areas are within the 75,550-acre Desert Peaks NCA. Within the Robledo Mountains Wilderness, a small corridor of approximately 100 acres has been designated as "potential wilderness" by section 3(g) of S. 1024. The lands included in this potential wilderness contain a communications right-of-way, and it is our understanding that it is the intention of the Chairman to allow the continued use of this site by the current lessees. However, in the event that the communications right-of-way is relinquished, these lands would be reclaimed and become part of the wilderness area. We support this provision.

Finally, the Potrillo Mountains complex in the southwest corner of Doña Ana County includes: Aden Lava Flow Wilderness (27,675 acres); Cinder Cone Wilderness (16,950 acres); Potrillo Mountains Wilderness (125,850 acres); and Whitethorn Wilderness (9,600 acres). Both the Potrillo Mountains Wilderness and Whitethorn Wilderness extend into adjacent Luna County.

Two National Conservation Areas are established by section 4 of the legislation – the Organ Mountains NCA and the Desert Peaks NCA. As noted above, both of these NCAs include proposed designated wilderness within their boundaries. Each of the NCAs designated by Congress and managed by the BLM is unique. However, all NCA designations have certain critical elements in common, including withdrawal from the public land, mining, and mineral leasing laws; off-highway vehicle use limitations; and language that charges the Secretary of the Interior with allowing only those uses that further the purposes for which the NCA is established. Furthermore, NCA designations should not diminish the protections that currently apply to the lands. Section 4 of the bill honors these principles, and the BLM supports the designation of both of these NCAs.

Much of the lands proposed for both wilderness and NCA designations have been historically grazed by domestic livestock, and grazing continues today. Many of BLM's existing wilderness areas and NCAs throughout the West are host to livestock grazing, which is compatible with these designations. This use will continue within the NCAs and wilderness areas designated by S. 1024.

Section 4(f) of the bill transfers administrative jurisdiction of 2,050 acres from DOD to the BLM. These lands, currently part of the Army's Fort Bliss, would be incorporated into the Organ Mountains NCA. The lands to be transferred include the dramatic and scenic Fillmore Canyon as well as the western slopes of Organ Peak and Ice Canyon. We would welcome these lands into BLM's National System of Public Lands.

Section 6 of S. 1024 concerns the recently established Prehistoric Trackways National Monument, just southeast of the proposed Desert Peaks NCA. The Monument was established in Title II, Subtitle B of the Omnibus Public Land Act (Public Law 111-11) signed by the President on March 30 2009. Section 6 of S. 1024 addresses recent additional discoveries of 280 million-year old reptile, insect, and plant fossils on adjacent BLM-managed lands by adding 670 acres to the Monument. The BLM supports this expansion of the Monument.

Section 5(d) of the legislation provides for the withdrawal of two parcels of BLM-managed lands from the land, mining, and mineral leasing laws. The parcel designated as "Parcel A" is approximately 1,300 acres of BLM-managed lands on the eastern outskirts of Las Cruces. This parcel is a popular hiking and mountain biking site, and provides easy access to the peak of the Tortugas Mountains. From here, visitors can take in spectacular views of Las Cruces and the Rio Grande Valley. We understand that Chairman Bingaman's goal is to ensure that these lands are preserved for continued recreational use by Las Cruces residents. The legislation provides for a possible lease of these lands to a governmental or nonprofit agency under the Recreation and Public Purposes Act. The larger, 6,500 acre parcel, designated as "Parcel B," lies on the southern end of the proposed Organ Mountains NCA. It is our understanding that Chairman Bingaman considered adding this parcel to the NCA because of important resource values. However, a multitude of current uses make inclusion of this parcel in the NCA inconsistent with the purposes established for the NCA. Therefore, the limited withdrawal of the parcel will better serve to protect the resources within this area without negatively affecting the current uses of the area. The BLM supports the withdrawal of both of these parcels.

In order to provide the greatest flexibility to the Department of Homeland Security and other law enforcement agencies, the bill includes a number of provisions to facilitate and improve border security. First, the legislation releases over 28,000 acres from WSA status along the southern boundary of the proposed Potrillo Mountains Wilderness. Additionally, it places 16,525 acres along that southern boundary in a “restricted use area.” The Secretary is charged with protecting the wilderness character of these lands to the extent practicable, while at the same time allowing for the installation of communications and surveillance facilities that may be necessary for law enforcement and border security purposes. Finally, in order to provide additional flexibility to law enforcement personnel, the bill keeps open for administrative and law enforcement uses only, an east-west route bisecting the Potrillo Mountains Wilderness.

Finally, the BLM, along with many partners, has undertaken restoration efforts on nearly two million acres in New Mexico, with the goal of restoring grasslands, woodlands, and riparian areas to their original healthy conditions. The BLM will continue to implement appropriate land restoration activities that will benefit watershed and wildlife health.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of S. 1024. Both the BLM and the Department welcome opportunities to engage in important discussions such as this that advance the protection of some of America’s most compelling landscapes. Passage of this legislation will ensure that generations of New Mexicans and all Americans will be able to witness a golden eagle soar over the Sierra de las Uvas, hike the landmark Organ Mountains, or hunt in the volcanic outcroppings of the Potrillo Mountains.