

**Statement of
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Department of the Interior
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
S. 1635, San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act
March 22, 2012**

Thank you for the invitation to testify on S. 1635, the San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act. The Department of the Interior supports the wilderness designation of the McKenna Peak area on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Additional protection for the McKenna Peak area was highlighted in Secretary Salazar's November 2011 *Preliminary Report to Congress on BLM Lands Deserving Protection as National Conservation Areas, Wilderness or Other Conservation Designations*. We urge swift Congressional action to protect this special area.

We defer to the Department of Agriculture regarding designations on lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service (FS).

Background

The McKenna Peak Wilderness Study Area (WSA) covers nearly 20,000 acres of BLM-managed lands in San Miguel and Dolores Counties in southwestern Colorado. This WSA is currently managed by the BLM to protect its wilderness characteristics while awaiting Congressional action.

This area is rich in wildlife, including mule deer, elk, mountain lions, black bear, and a variety of raptors. The McKenna Peak area is also home to the Spring Creek wild horse herd. Geologically, the area is quite diverse and includes 100 million year-old remnants of inland seas (now black Mancos shale rich in invertebrate marine fossils). This area offers a wide variety of recreational opportunities, including hunting, hiking, horseback riding, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing, all of which are compatible with this wilderness designation.

S. 1635

S. 1635 is the result of a collaborative process, including the Colorado Congressional delegation, county commissioners, adjacent landowners, ranchers, conservationists, recreationists, and other interested parties. The results are the proposed wilderness designations on both BLM- and FS-managed lands in San Miguel, Ouray, and San Juan Counties.

Section 3 of the bill designates 8,600 acres of the existing BLM-managed McKenna Peak WSA as wilderness. The BLM supports this designation. The legislation covers only those areas of the WSA in San Miguel County. The remaining almost 11,000 acres of the WSA, which include the eponymous McKenna Peak, are south of the proposed wilderness in Dolores County and are not addressed in the legislation. These acres will remain in WSA status, pending Congressional action. The BLM and the Department support future designation of this area in order to improve

the manageability of the area. The BLM is currently completing a careful review of the boundaries of the proposed wilderness area to ensure manageability and would welcome the opportunity to work with the sponsor on possible minor modifications.

Section 6 of S. 1635 provides for the release from Wilderness Study Area (WSA) status of those portions of the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness Study Area that were not designated as Wilderness under Title II, Subtitle E of Public Law 111-11, the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009. Section 2403 of that Act designated the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness Area. However, small portions of the underlying WSA totaling approximately 3,035 acres were neither designated wilderness nor released from WSA status, which would allow the consideration of a range of multiple uses. This release would benefit the BLM's ongoing management by removing narrow strips and scattered tracts of remaining WSA. These areas remain within the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area (NCA), also designated by Public Law 111-11 and will be managed consistent with the rest of the NCA.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of S. 1635. We look forward to its swift passage and to welcoming the covered area into the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System.