

**Statement of
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**House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, & Public Lands**

**H.R. 2546, Colorado Wilderness Act
July 10, 2019**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 2546, the Colorado Wilderness Act. H.R. 2546 proposes wide-ranging wilderness designations on over 721,000 acres of lands primarily managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). Some of the proposed designations also include small portions of lands managed by the National Park Service (NPS) and Bureau of Reclamation (BOR).

As a matter of policy, the Department of the Interior (Department) supports Congressional action to resolve wilderness designation and wilderness study area (WSA) release issues on public lands across the West, and we welcome opportunities to further those efforts. However, we also want to ensure that designating new wilderness areas on public lands outside of existing WSAs is the most appropriate land management tool. While wilderness designation may be appropriate for some of the areas included in this legislation, the Department is concerned that certain designations in the bill may present management challenges and be inconsistent with existing land uses, as well as other uses that are of importance to the public. In addition, we note that the conservation proposals that have reached fruition over the last decade have been more limited in geographic scope, spanning a county, a specific region, or a Congressional District. As a result, the Department cannot support H.R. 2546 as currently written.

The Department welcomes the opportunity to work cooperatively with the sponsors of the legislation, the Subcommittee, and all members of the Colorado delegation on wilderness issues in the State. The individual conservation designations in the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act (Public Law 116-9) may serve as a good model for refining the approach in H.R. 2546, especially over such a broad and diverse set of lands.

The Department defers to the U.S. Department of Agriculture regarding the proposed designations on lands managed by the USFS.

H.R. 2456

H.R. 2456 proposes to create or expand 30 wilderness areas totaling approximately 686,000 acres on lands primarily managed by the BLM and USFS, with small portions of some of the designations also on lands managed by the NPS and BOR. The bill would also designate two potential wilderness areas totaling approximately 35,300 acres on lands managed by the BLM and USFS. These designations are largely focused in western Colorado, and they generally serve

as habitat for a diversity of plant and animal life and provide important opportunities for hiking, hunting, rock climbing, horseback riding, and other forms of outdoor recreation.

The Department notes that the Castle Peak and Browns Canyon areas, as well as some of the other proposed designations, are within existing WSAs that we recommended as suitable for wilderness in 1991. Depending on specific boundaries, the Department could support the designation of these areas as wilderness. We would, however, like the opportunity to work further with the sponsors and the Subcommittee on a few boundary adjustments to these proposals to avoid private property, established motorized routes, and producing oil wells. In addition, there are several modifications that we believe would aid implementation, including language clarifying certain terms and the applicable responsible BLM field offices, as well as clarifying amendments regarding how any potential wilderness areas should be managed.

The Department also requests that language be added to the bill ensuring that portions of underlying WSAs not designated as wilderness by the bill be released for other multiple uses.

There are also several areas proposed for wilderness designation under H.R. 2546 where conflicts with existing uses and other public use interests make manageability as wilderness challenging. Recreational use has exploded on public lands throughout the West, including in Colorado. While many recreational activities, such as hunting, fishing, and hiking are compatible with wilderness designation, others, such as mountain biking and off-highway vehicle use, are not. Some of the areas proposed for wilderness designation contain popular motorized or mechanized recreation areas.

For example, the proposed Bangs Canyon Wilderness is bisected by the nationally recognized Tabeguache Trail. Just over 8 miles of the 142-mile Tabeguache Trail connecting Grand Junction and Montrose pass through the area proposed for wilderness designation. This trail is popular with the public and accommodates both mountain bikes and motorized recreationists, both of which are incompatible with wilderness designation. Under the BLM's 2015 Grand Junction Field Office Resource Management Plan (RMP), approximately 19,600 acres of the proposed wilderness are within a Special Recreation Management Area and managed as a back-country primitive area. The remaining approximately 1,300 acres is currently managed for mechanized or motorized uses.

Additionally, existing energy development poses inherent challenges with wilderness designations, creating complex management issues pertaining to extensive active mining claims and oil and gas leases within a designated wilderness. For example, approximately 11,000 acres of the proposed South Shale Ridge Wilderness contain existing oil and gas leases, and include 9 producing wells. Another 16,000 acres of oil and gas leases within this area are currently pending additional environmental review. This area, part of the Piceance Basin, has been identified by the BLM as an oil and gas emphasis area for over 20 years.

Likewise, nearly half of the proposed Snaggletooth Wilderness is currently under lease for oil and gas development, with 27 leases existing within the area, and active uranium mining claims are present. Similarly, there are 23 active uranium mining claims in the proposed Table Mountain Wilderness. An extensive network of 47 miles of primitive roads supporting uranium

exploration crisscrosses the area. As directed by the President in Executive Order 13817, the Department is currently assessing critical mineral resources on Federal public lands and offshore lands. Additionally, uranium has been identified by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) as a critical mineral necessary to the economic and national security of the United States.

The Department is concerned that the relatively large number of existing resource uses in these areas would make it difficult for the BLM to manage them in a manner consistent with the requirements of the Wilderness Act. As such, the Department would like to work further with the sponsors and the Subcommittee on boundary adjustments to the proposals to ensure that these areas can be most effectively managed for multiple uses.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 2546. The Department looks forward to working with the sponsors and the Subcommittee to address the issues outlined above as this bill moves through the legislative process.