

**Statement of
Christopher McAlear
Assistant Director
National Conservation Lands & Community Partnerships
Bureau of Land Management
U.S. Department of the Interior**

**Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, & Mining
S. 2721, San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act
August 22, 2018**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S. 2721, the San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act, which provides direction for the future management of Federal lands in Colorado's San Miguel, Ouray, and San Juan Counties. S. 2721 designates the McKenna Peak Wilderness on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and releases the remainder of the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness Study Area (WSA) from further wilderness study under section 603(c) of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), thereby making these lands available for other multiple uses. The bill also designates two new special management areas comprising approximately 22,500 acres and expands three wildernesses by approximately 23,000 acres on lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service.

Secretary Zinke has pledged to expand access to America's public lands, to increase hunting, fishing, and recreational opportunities nationwide, and to enhance conservation stewardship through Secretarial Orders 3347, 3356, and 3366. To advance those goals, Secretary Zinke focuses on restoring full collaboration and coordination with local communities and making the Department of the Interior (Department) a better neighbor.

As a matter of policy, the Department supports Congressional action to resolve issues of wilderness designation and release of WSAs on public lands across the West, and we welcome opportunities to further those efforts. However, there may be alternative approaches for managing the lands identified in S. 2721. We would like the opportunity to work with the sponsor and the Subcommittee to determine if wilderness and special management area designations are the best mechanism for managing these important resources and uses. The Department defers to the Department of Agriculture regarding provisions in the bill concerning the lands and interests they administer.

Background

The McKenna Peak WSA covers nearly 20,000 acres of BLM-managed lands in San Miguel and Dolores Counties in southwestern Colorado. The Department notes that this area generally serves as habitat for a diversity of plant and animal life, including mule deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, mountain lions, and bald and golden eagles. The WSA also provides important opportunities for hunting, hiking, horseback riding, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing.

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Section 3 of the bill designates approximately 8,600 acres of the existing BLM-managed McKenna Peak WSA as wilderness. Only Congress can determine whether to designate WSAs as wilderness or to release them for other multiple uses. The McKenna Peak WSA has been pending final resolution by Congress since 1991. The Department, therefore, supports Congressional action to settle the status of these lands, which would provide certainty to public land users in Colorado.

We note, however, that section 3 covers only those areas of the WSA in San Miguel County. The remaining almost 11,000 acres of the WSA in Dolores County are not addressed in the legislation. These acres would remain in WSA status, pending Congressional action. The Department recommends that the sponsor and the Subcommittee consider addressing this portion of the WSA as well. If this area is not to be designated as wilderness, we believe that it should be released from WSA status. In addition, we would like to work with the sponsor on a few modifications to this section, including adjustments to the boundary to follow existing natural resource and topographical features instead of the county line, which would enhance manageability.

Section 6 of S. 2721 provides for the release from WSA status of those portions of the Dominguez Canyon WSA 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 other 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 would be managed consistent with the rest of the NCA.

In addition to this needed WSA release, the Department recommends that the sponsor consider whether to release other small WSAs and Instant Study Areas (ISAs) in Colorado that were not included in previous wilderness designations, including the Black Ridge Canyons, Bill Hare Gulch, North Sand Hills, Needle Rock, and High Mesa Grassland areas. Each of these areas are challenging for the BLM to manage because of their small size and proximity to existing development. Release of these areas would provide important opportunities for multiple uses and recreational access, including hunting and fishing, hiking, camping, and horseback riding, among others.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. The Department looks forward to continuing to work with the sponsor and the Subcommittee as this bill moves forward through the legislative process.