

STATEMENT

NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND FORESTS COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES UNITED STATES HOUSE SENATE APRIL 28, 2010

CONCERNING

S2762, the “San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act of 2009”

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the views of the Department of Agriculture on S2762, the “San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act of 2009.”

The Department supports S2762. We would like to offer minor modifications to S 2762 that would enhance wilderness values, clarify the special management area designation, and improve our ability to manage resources in the area. We thank Congressman Salazar for his collaborative approach and local involvement that have contributed to this bill.

The Department defers to the Department of the Interior in regard to the proposal to designate approximately 8,600 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands as the McKenna Peak Wilderness.

S2762 would designate nine parcels of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests as wilderness under the National Wilderness Preservation System. These areas, totaling approximately 24,800 acres, encompass some of Colorado’s most majestic, remote landscapes with many abundant wildlife species including elk, deer, bighorn sheep, bears and a variety of birds. Several world-class trout streams are also found in the areas. These areas also provide opportunities to experience solitude and primitive recreation use for members of the public seeking areas to connect with nature.

These parcels would be additions to two existing wildernesses: Lizard Head and Mount Sneffels. In addition, S2762 would designate the Sheep Mountain area as a Special Management Area to be managed to maintain the area’s existing wilderness character and potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Also, S2762 would provide for a mineral withdrawal within a portion of Naturita Canyon.

Lizard Head Wilderness Additions

The Lizard Head Wilderness lies astride the spectacular San Miguel Mountains, 10 miles southwest of Telluride on the Uncompahgre and San Juan National Forests. Elevations in the area range from 9,500 to over 14,000 feet. The wilderness is evenly split between the two national forests and is 41,200 acres in size.

The proposed wilderness additions include five parcels, encompassing approximately 3,200 acres of National Forest System lands adjacent to the existing wilderness. Neither Forest Plans, completed in 1983, recommended any of the areas for wilderness designation. However, wilderness designation would be aligned with the current management of the area. No summer motorized recreation is currently allowed and effects to winter motorized recreation will be minimal as there is very 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. Elevations range from 9,600 to 14,150 feet at the top of Mount Sneffels.

The proposed wilderness additions include four parcels that encompass approximately 21,600 acres of NFS lands adjacent to the existing wilderness. As with the Lizard Head Additions, even though this area was not recommended as wilderness in the forest plan, designation is generally aligned with forest plan direction and will have minimal effects on summer and winter recreation.

We would like to work with the subcommittee to address some technical aspects of the bill. We recommend changing the wilderness boundary near Telluride to allow for potential construction work to address periodic floods with debris flows and provide for a more definitive boundary by following a cliff formation. Additionally, we remain concerned that the legislation would provide for continuation of a competitive footrace event in designated wilderness. Current Forest Service policy does not permit competitive events and this reflects the Wilderness Act prohibition against commercial enterprise.

Sheep Mountain Special Management Area

S2762 would also designate an area of about 21,700 acres of NFS land that lies south of the town of Ophir as a special management area. About 9,900 acres are within the Uncompahgre National Forest and about 11,800 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.

Elevations in the area range from 10,200 to almost 13,900 feet at the top of Vermillion Peak. The area is dense with spruce and fir trees at the lower elevations. Above timberline are high alpine valleys with numerous lakes, tarns and waterfalls beneath dramatic 13,000-foot peaks and serrated ridges. The Forest Plans identify half of the area

to be managed for semi-primitive non-motorized recreation and the other half for other recreation purposes.

As with the Mount Sneffels Wilderness additions, we have concerns that if this area becomes wilderness, the legislation allows for the continuation of a competitive footrace event.

Naturita Canyon Withdrawal

S2762 would also provide for a withdrawal on approximately 6,600 acres of National Forest System lands 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) with steep canyon walls that tower 1,000 feet. There are no current leases within the area proposed for withdrawal. Impacts on available oil and gas resources for this withdrawal are unknown. Further exploration information would be needed for a conclusive assessment.

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