



Board of County Commissioners

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July 5, 2023

Colorado Bureau of Land Management State Director
Doug Vilsack Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Colorado State Office 2850 Youngfield St.
Lakewood, Colorado 80215

CC: Senator Michael Bennet, Senator John Hickenlooper, Representative Joe Neguse

Dear State Director Vilsack:

We are writing to you in support of BLM's recently proposed Public Lands Rule, which would place conservation on equal footing with other multiple uses managed by the BLM on public lands. Over 80% of Eagle County, Colorado's nearly 1.1 million acres is public lands. Eagle County is home to portions of the White River National Forest (the most-visited national forest in the nation with over 17.8 million visitors per year - more than Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, and Rocky Mountain National Parks combined). Eagle County is also home to the Eagles Nest, Holy Cross and Flat Tops Wilderness Areas, and the BLM's Castle Peak and Bull Gulch Wilderness Study Areas.

About a quarter million acres in Eagle County are managed by the BLM. Like the rest of Colorado, where only 16% of BLM's 8.3 million acres are durably protected, most of those Eagle County lands are not permanently conserved.

These public lands contribute to our world-class outdoor recreation experiences and help ensure our local economy thrives. Maintaining the historic ranching cultural identity alongside tourism and ski resorts can be seen throughout Eagle County with numerous grazing allotments on BLM and Forest Service lands.

As local elected officials of Eagle County, we would like to express our commitment to protecting these landscapes that provide so much to our communities. We commend the BLM on recent agency guidance that prioritizes the health of public lands and encourage the BLM to continue to place conservation at the forefront of the rulemaking that will occur in 2023.

We applaud the BLM for creating a new tool - conservation leases - as part of the proposed rule. These "leases" would be temporary, allowing local groups to work with BLM on restoration projects or renewable energy companies to enter into leases for compensatory mitigation purposes to offset the impacts of projects on public lands elsewhere. This is a very promising and complementary tool to support intact, well functioning landscapes across our County and around the West.

Clarification in the proposed rule that appropriately balances conservation values with other types of land practices will allow the BLM to create management plans that benefit rural economies like ours.



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Management for Resilient Ecosystems

The proposed Rule furthermore establishes a guiding principle that BLM manage for resiliency in public lands through protection of intact, native habitats, and restoration of degraded habitats.

Eagle County is a headwaters County. Our community members rely on public lands not only for their quality of life and wildlife habitat, but also to provide our communities with safe drinking water. Water from Eagle County flows into the mighty Colorado River and helps provide water for drinking, agriculture, power and industry for 40 million people downstream. Maintaining healthy watersheds that can be resilient in the face of drought and fire is a priority for our County and our state, and we believe the proposed BLM rule will assist in that resilience.

Multiple Use and Collaboration

Eighty-five percent of BLM lands in our local field office are open to oil and gas development. These include popular recreation and critical wildlife habitat areas on the Colorado and Eagle Rivers. We have worked for years to protect and restore these areas and to prevent permitting of potentially damaging uses that could fragment these intact landscapes.

The management of public lands has a significant impact on our local communities. Having a federal land management partner with clear direction to work with local communities on balancing multiple uses, including conservation – like what is proposed in the new rule – will only strengthen the collaboration we already rely on and will provide our communities with more certainty that our needs will be considered in BLM planning and land management decisions.

As the ancestral home of many Indigenous communities, Colorado's public lands can especially benefit from management that incorporates the knowledge and perspectives of native Tribes. Because of this, we support the BLM's commitment to incorporate co-stewardship between the federal and tribal governments into the management practices overseeing these lands. We believe that this is not only good for the conservation and sustainability of Colorado landscapes, but will also benefit our communities by bringing underrepresented voices to the table.

BLM lands play an important role in supporting world-class recreation opportunities that create Colorado's \$9.6 billion outdoor recreation economy. Tourism and outdoor recreation account for roughly 50% of Eagle County's \$181 million in annual revenues. Eagle County has worked hard to create a diversified economy that includes and balances development while conserving our world class public lands. We rely on having federal land management partners that work with us to balance these needs.

Conservation of our public lands is increasingly important to the residents and visitors of Eagle County. Protection of wildlands benefits wildlife, places recreation where more appropriate and mitigates the impacts of climate change. Because Eagle County is home to so many federal public lands, the County relies on our federal land management



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partners to manage for the integrity of these wildland habitats and watersheds, using legislative and administrative designations and other tools at their disposal. While congressionally designated areas such as the Holy Cross and Eagles Nest Wilderness areas are popular and cherished places, the County also benefits from lesser-known administrative management tools such as Colorado Roadless Rule areas on our national forests and BLM's Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs), Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs), Special Recreation Management Areas (SRMAs) and managed Lands with Wilderness Characteristics (LWC). These administrative tools provide durable protections and focused management to protect critical resources.

This new rule will rectify the misalignment of the multi-use mandate by creating a conservation leasing program which would allow community partners to engage in restoration and mitigation projects on public lands. This program could help strengthen threatened and degraded wildlife corridors, may be key to stemming the effects of climate change on delicate ecosystems, and will provide an incentive structure for activities that heal public lands.

Thank you, State Director Vilsak, for your continued support of Eagle County and the work we do in partnership with the BLM to solve local issues together. If the BLM Public Lands Rule is enacted, it will allow the BLM to ensure conservation of critical public lands in Eagle County and across the West. The rule will support the agency's effort to balance conservation with other multiple uses and allow the agency to balance its management practices and work with local managers in communities like Eagle County to protect important recreation and conservation areas vital to our economies and ways-of-life.

Sincerely,

Kathy Chandler-Henry

Chair

Matt Scherr

Commissioner