

STATEMENT OF
CONGRESSMAN JOHN SALAZAR
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

JANUARY 21, 2010

CONCERNING

H.R. 3914 - The San Juan Mountain Wilderness Act of 2009

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much for holding this hearing and for allowing me the opportunity to testify on HR 3914, The San Juan Mountain Wilderness Act of 2009 which I have introduced at the request of my constituents in Colorado's beautiful Third Congressional District.

I would like to begin by acknowledging my colleagues from Colorado who are here with us today; Representative Coffman from Colorado's Sixth Congressional District and Representative DeGette from Colorado's First Congressional District.

I also would like to thank one of my constituents, Jeff Widen, who is here today from the Wilderness Support Center in Durango Colorado, Mr. Widen's leadership and work on this legislation has been vital.

This bill is the product of long, hard work and I thank all of those from my district who were involved in this process. This bill has earned broad support within Colorado's Third Congressional District and I am proud of the support which has come from long negotiations and consensus building. This legislation was requested by the three county commissions that represent this area. It also enjoys support from entities that don't always agree on the need for Wilderness. Mountain bikers, NRA members, local ranchers, water districts and Excel Energy all support this bill due to the way it was designed to bring all parties to the middle ground for a final bill that respects all stakeholders. This bill will provide for preservation of a world-class resource and will empower mountain communities to continue to attract visitors to the incomparable beauty of Colorado's San Juan Mountains.

The San Juan Mountain Wilderness Act will provide permanent protection for close to 62,000 acres of public land on the on the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison and San Juan National Forests and San Juan Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Resource

Area. All of the acreage affected by this proposal is in San Miguel, Ouray and San Juan Counties and the designations in this bill have the support of the County Commissions and municipalities of those three counties.

As per this bill, 13,231 acres will be added to the existing Mt. Sneffels Wilderness Area by the Whitehouse addition. 3,170 acres will be added to the existing Lizard Head Wilderness Area through the Blackface, Sunshine and Wilson additions. 8,375 acres will be added to the existing Mt. Sneffels Wilderness Area via the Liberty Bell and Last Dollar additions and 8,614 acres of the McKenna Peak Wilderness Study Area will be designated as Wilderness. Total Wilderness area designations under this bill will be 24,776 acres.

In addition, two other designations will be created by the proposed legislation. 21,697 acres in San Juan and San Miguel Counties, including Ice Lake basin and the high alpine peaks near Ophir, will be designated as the "Sheep Mountain Special Management Area." Existing uses, including heli-skiing, will be allowed to continue indefinitely, but no new roads or other development will be permitted. This designation is a compromise which has been supported by all relevant stakeholders that will provide for legislative protection while still allowing valid and pre-existing uses to continue. Finally 6,595 acres will be withdrawn from eligibility for mineral leasing in Naturita Canyon, respecting the wishes of the local community that no other uses in the canyon will be impacted. All together almost 62,000 acres will have some form of legislative protection as a result of this bill.

This bill will protect some of our country's most beautiful mountain land and scenic vistas. While there is currently a Mt. Sneffels Wilderness area in the San Juan Mountains, the current Wilderness boundaries for which this Wilderness is named do not actually protect most of the slopes of Mt. Sneffels itself. This bill will add that crucial acreage to the Mt. Sneffels Wilderness area, thus ensuring permanent protection for all of Mt. Sneffels. This peak one is of the most famous in Colorado. Its north slope is highly visible from many highways in the southwest region and has been an often sought target of international photographers and has graced numerous calendars. When people think of the beauty of Colorado they often think of Mt. Sneffels. This bill will thus secure one of Colorado's most famous landscapes for future generations.

This bill will also provide Wilderness designation to the slopes of Wilson peak. In addition to its stunning beauty, Wilson Peak is well known across the country as its silhouette was the inspiration for the iconic Coors beer label. This treasured mountain too will now be fully protected.

In addition, this bill protects some of the most famous high mountain basins in Colorado including Ice Lake Basin in San Juan County. As the San Juan County Commissioners noted in their resolution of support for this bill, preservation of this iconic basin will help their economy by protecting the scenic and recreational values that bring people to San Juan County.

Sportsmen and hunters are deeply supportive of this proposal as well. This bill will protect many wild areas that provide some of the best hunting and fishing opportunities in

Southwest Colorado. Both of these activities are vital to the economy of Southwest Colorado bringing in millions of dollars of economic activity every year.

Mr. Chairman I would like to present some background on how this legislation was developed. In June of 2007 the San Miguel Colorado Commissioners wrote to me and requested that I introduce legislation to designate specific areas as Wilderness areas. The Colorado counties of Ouray and San Juan subsequently sent me letters also requesting that I introduce legislation to designate Wilderness areas in their counties as well. I also received letters of support from the municipalities of Telluride, Mountain Village, Ophir, Norwood, Ridgeway and Ouray Colorado, all of which are within the above mentioned counties. Based on this local input I decided to move forward and develop legislation in coordination with these communities.

The San Juan Mountain Wilderness Act was built from the ground up. No one knows the beauty and history of these landscapes like the people who live, work and raise their families in the splendor of these mountains. My job is to listen to the input of those constituents, take their concerns into account and then work to implement the will of these communities.

I do not take Wilderness designations like this lightly. I have done extensive outreach over the course of two and a half years prior to the introduction of this bill. I have reached out to all the owners of inholdings within these areas as well as every grazing permittee who had acreage under this consideration. As a cattle rancher, I know how important it is for the government to have proactive, open and honest dialogue with anyone who may be in close proximity to land which is the subject of legislation.

Either I or my staff sat down and met with all interested parties on this proposal during dozens of meetings. We met with ranchers and grazing permittees, home owner associations, motorized user groups, municipal and county officials, water districts, wilderness advocates, oil and gas companies and officials with the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service.

Based on this input from these local entities I adjusted and amended this proposal in many ways. Boundaries were drawn to ensure that no trail that is currently open under the BLM or Forest Service Travel Management plans to ATVs or motorized use was closed. I believe strongly that motorized use is a legitimate use of our National Forests and it is not my intent to close down that use where it is established. I worked with advocates for motorized use in this region to ensure that I was not closing any trails that are legally open to motorcycles and ATV use. For example my staff met with the Public Access Preservation Association of Telluride the motorized advocacy group for the north side of the San Juan Mountains. They confirmed that there are no motorized trails that they would lose access to through this bill. I also dropped significant acreage from this bill that was proposed to me for Wilderness near the proposed McKenna Peak Wilderness and the Sunshine addition to the Lizard Head Wilderness. Also due to concerns by motorized users I did not put Naturita Canyon in this bill for a full Wilderness designation. Instead I am seeking a designation that will ban development on the canyon walls of Naturita Canyon while still allowing motorized use in the area to continue as it does now. Together these changes removed many thousands of acres of areas from the

proposal that could have limited motorized access. I am proud to say my bill will not close a single legal trail that is currently open to motorized vehicle use. Due to similar outreach to the mountain bike community the International Mountain Bike Association also supports this legislation.

My bill will also allow a pre-existing helicopter skiing operation, Helitrax, to continue to operate in the Sheep Mountain Special Management Area. That use is not only a valid one for recreational purposes but Helitrax also provides avalanche control services and emergency helicopter rescues in the region that have saved many lives.

Also protected by this bill is an institution that is cherished in Southwest Colorado, the Hardrock 100, a footrace where endurance athletes race 100 miles over some of the most rugged terrain in the country. This race helps bring many visitors and economic benefits to southwest Colorado and is a prime example of how these magnificent landscapes can help promote sustainable economic development. Nothing in this legislation does anything to impede the ability of the Hardrock 100 race to continue into the future. That provision is a key part of this legislation and very important to the communities of southwest Colorado. A race that leaves only footprints behind in its wake is a very valid use of Wilderness that I wholeheartedly support.

Mr. Chairman, just as it is in your home district, water is our most precious resource in Western Colorado. This bill will protect the headwaters of many important rivers in Colorado including those of the Animas, San Miguel and Uncompahgre Rivers. These areas are an important part of the municipal watersheds of many communities such as Telluride, Ridgway, Ouray and Silverton. Wilderness will protect the healthy and clean water supply these communities deserve.

I have worked hard to gather input from local water users in my district to ensure that my bill will not negatively impact any pre-existing uses. The water language I use in my bill builds on the work of previous Wilderness designations in Colorado. This language was the result of compromise between the water community and Wilderness advocates. Commonly known as the "Headwaters language" it provides protection for watersheds while also preserving existing water rights and prohibiting new federal reserved water rights. The language also clearly allows all water users to access and maintain any existing water diversions or structures in the newly created wilderness areas. In areas where traditional access to those water facilities has been conducted with motorized vehicles that type of access is allowed to continue. During the drafting of this bill the boundary of the San Miguel Wilderness area was actually adjusted so that major municipal water supply facilities near Ophir and Telluride would not be affected. I have also worked closely with the local water districts and the Colorado State Engineer and they are supportive of this language. This is the type of wilderness designation I can support, one that respects well established pre-existing water uses which are vital for my constituents.

In conclusion, the San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act has broad based support from all relevant stakeholders in Southwest Colorado. It was built from the ground up with input from all relevant stakeholders to create a bill that reflects the will of my constituents in

these communities. It is strongly supported by the three counties and six municipalities it affects most directly. The San Juan Mountains are one of Colorado's most treasured landscapes, a land of soaring peaks, beautiful forests and crystal clear water. This bill will ensure that these areas remain a place of beauty and wonder for our children and grandchildren to enjoy. This is the sort of grassroots Wilderness legislation that I am proud to support and I hope that the committee will as well.

I hope that the testimony I have provided today is helpful to the Committee members as they consider HR 3914. I thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify and hope that you can support this important legislation.