

Testimony of Jeff Widen
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on H.R. 3914, San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act

Presented to the
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands

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**On Behalf of The Wilderness Society, Sheep Mountain Alliance, San Juan Citizens Alliance,
Ridgway-Ouray Community Council, Silverton Mountain School, Colorado Mountain Club,
Colorado Environmental Coalition, Colorado Wild, Environment Colorado, Campaign for
America's Wilderness**

Chairman Grijalva, Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of The Wilderness Society and its half million members and supporters nationwide, and on behalf of the organizations listed above, I would like to thank the Committee for considering the San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act of 2009. This bill would not only protect some of Colorado's beloved scenic wild country, it is also the product of years of painstaking research and consultation with a myriad of interested and affected stakeholders in southwest Colorado. I would especially like to thank Congressman Salazar for his commitment to protecting these deserving areas, and his dedication and that of his staff in putting together a finely crafted piece of public land protection legislation. Being a farmer and rancher with deep family roots in Colorado, Congressman Salazar's love of the land is clearly reflected in this bill as well as others he has sponsored.

I'd also like to acknowledge fellow Coloradan and Committee member Congresswoman DeGette, and her unfailing dedication to environmental protection and wilderness in our State.

Colorado has a long and rich tradition of wilderness protection, with nearly twenty bills enacted over the last 45 years. All of these have shared the characteristics of broad citizen and stakeholder support and cooperation among the State's delegation members. The San Juan Mountains Act is carrying on this proud Colorado tradition. We have enjoyed working with Congressman Salazar on this legislation, and look forward to future work with the Congressman and the rest of the delegation in continuing the great history of Colorado Wilderness.

This legislation had its genesis with the interest of San Miguel County citizens in adding deserving wild land areas to the already designated Mt. Sneffels and Lizard Head Wildernesses, and adding statutory protection to several other spectacular and qualifying backcountry landscapes. Residents of neighboring counties also advocated protection for deserving contiguous lands outside San Miguel County, and by the

Spring of 2009, the proposal included lands in three counties (San Miguel, Ouray, and San Juan), and enjoyed nearly universal support in the region. More detail about that follows.

Colorado's San Juan Mountains offer a myriad of benefits and services to residents of Colorado and visitors from across the nation. Spectacular mountain vistas, clean water and air, ongoing ranching operations, healthy wildlife populations, and a wide variety of world-class recreational opportunities, from hunting and angling to skiing, hiking, and boating. In decades past, hard rock mining was a major force in the region's development; evidence of this history is scattered across the landscape in the form of weathered mill sites, mine shafts, and tailings piles. As the economic drivers in the intermountain West steadily evolved during the post-war 20th century, and outdoor recreation grew in popularity, local communities looked increasingly toward tourism and recreation as a significant part of their economic foundations. Visitors come to the region in large numbers to enjoy not only backcountry challenges, but also to experience the area's rich history. Thousands of tourists ride the original narrow gauge train from Durango to Silverton each year, to wander the town's historic main street or learn about the region's mining history.

As one measure of this modern economy, hunting and fishing alone brought in, in direct expenditures, \$7.2 million in San Miguel County, \$2.4 million in Ouray County, and \$1.3 million in San Juan County in 2002. Hunting and fishing groups routinely emphasize the importance of protected lands as the basis for healthy game populations.

As the economy of the San Juan Mountains region has evolved into what it is today, and as more and more people visit to experience the natural and recreational values offered by the area's public lands, the protection of those lands has become increasingly valued by local residents, stakeholders, and elected officials. This phenomenon has occurred concurrent with our increasing knowledge of the importance of large areas of undisturbed land for a broad array of wildlife, both to maintain functioning natural systems, and for the human benefits that healthy wildlife populations provide. Protective designations also help to ensure the resiliency of these areas in the face of climate change.

Protected public lands provide a critical benefit to local communities in the form of clean water and air. Each of the areas proposed for permanent protection in this legislation contain portions of the watersheds that comprise the water supplies of Telluride, Ouray, Ridgway, and Silverton. Wilderness will keep those watersheds intact and ensure they are able to provide clean water to those communities in perpetuity.

Natural and Human Values of the San Juan Mountains

The San Juan Mountains, and pointedly the areas proposed for protection in this legislation, offer a rich array of natural and environmental values. The existing Mt. Sneffels and Lizard Head Wilderness areas are the headwaters of the San Miguel, Dolores, and Uncompahgre Rivers, and many of their tributaries, such as Deep Creek, Dallas Creek, Bilk Creek, and Wilson Creek. Areas in the legislation make up large portions of the municipal water supplies for towns in all three counties. These waterways also offer some of the West's finest fishing opportunities – anglers from across the country come to southwest Colorado to fish for many species, including the iconic Colorado Cutthroat Trout.

What wildlife of all kinds needs more than anything is space – large areas of land in which to feed, grow, and bear their young. The mountain areas in the legislation will expand the core habitat already protected in the Mt. Sneffels and Lizard Head Wildernesses, and increase the elevation range of existing protected areas by adding habitat rich down-slope areas. The Sheep Mountain designation would add another significant core habitat area, and improve the wildlife connectivity to protected areas on the San Juan National Forest, like the Weminuche Wilderness. These mountain designations will benefit existing populations of Black bear, elk, bighorn sheep, and bird species such as the white-tailed ptarmigan, and provide critical habitat for other wildlife such as Canada lynx and Northern goshawk.

Moving down from the higher mountain areas, the proposed McKenna Peak Wilderness and mineral withdrawal for Naturita Canyon would protect mid-elevation lands critical as winter range for deer and elk (North Mountain, which borders McKenna Peak, contains one of the largest deer and elk herds in Colorado), as well as habitat for such species as mountain lion, bald eagle, and peregrine falcon. The mineral withdrawal proposed for Naturita Canyon would protect more of these vital lands, benefitting not only the resident deer, elk, bobcat, raptors and rare birds like the Mexican spotted owl; but a rich riparian zone as well.

Ecosystem representation, or selecting areas for protection that represent a full range of habitats and vegetation types, is a way of ensuring protection of the species that rely on these various ecosystems for survival. The Nature Conservancy, which practices this “coarse filter” method, estimates that 85% to 90% of all species in a region can be protected via ecosystem representation. Protecting down-slope mountain landscapes, as well as mid-elevation areas like McKenna Peak and Naturita Canyon would expand ecosystem representation in the region; this helps fulfill the purposes not only of the 1964 Wilderness Act, but of conservation biology overall.

Agriculture has a rich history in the San Juan Mountains, and not only provides a long-standing livelihood for multi-generational families, but also forms an essential part of the cultural fabric of the entire region. There are nearly a dozen working ranches with allotments that overlap the areas in the legislation. These ranch operators were all consulted as the legislation was crafted; following is a quote from Ouray County rancher Liza Clark, owner of the Ferguson Family Ranch, from a letter to Congressman Salazar:

“I was happy to learn that the proposed boundaries avoid any substantial conflict with existing uses and private property. I understand that grazing leases will continue under any new wilderness designation.”

“I respectfully request that you introduce legislation to expand the Sneffels Wilderness Area in Ouray County. This proposal has widespread support in our County and includes signature views, including Mount Sneffels itself which is currently only partially contained in its namesake Wilderness Area.”

Recreation and tourism is the backbone of the San Juan Mountains regional economy. For visitors who come to explore the region’s history, go on a jeep tour, or ride the Durango-Silverton train, the backdrop views of majestic mountain peaks is essential to the experience. Winter recreation is dominated by skiing, including the developed alpine resort of Telluride, the recently developed Silverton Mountain area, and Colorado’s only heli-skiing operation. Backcountry skiing is hugely popular across the range.

In the warmer months, recreational users comb the mountains. Hikers enjoy thousands of miles of trails, whether to see the spectacular views of the Telluride valley from atop its enclosing cliffs, or through a

multi-day backpack into the beautiful Ice Lakes Basin out of Silverton. Climbers challenge themselves against the iconic 14,150 foot Mt. Sneffels, the rock walls near Telluride, and the famous frozen waterfalls just outside of Ouray. The San Juan Mountains are a world class destination for mountain biking, and many trails skirt the edges of the areas in H.R. 3914. The famous Hard Rock 100 footrace – one of most grueling of its kind in the nation - courses through the heart of the region.

Outreach to Regional Stakeholders

The process of outreach for, and vetting of, the San Juan Mountains Wilderness proposal has been detailed and comprehensive. Thanks to the leadership of local citizens groups in the three counties – Sheep Mountain Alliance in San Miguel County, the Ridgway-Ouray Community Council in Ouray County, the Silverton Mountain School in San Juan County, and the San Juan Citizens Alliance for the McKenna Peak proposal – the original proposal was crafted with extensive and intimate familiarity of the landscapes of interest. Each of these local groups worked closely with their respective county governments in carefully considering the ramifications and benefits of protective designations. San Miguel County first contacted Congressman Salazar in June 2007 to request the introduction of wilderness legislation, followed a short time later by the Commission of Ouray County. San Juan County followed in 2009, with an endorsement of expanding the proposed Sheep Mountain Special Management Area.

Extensive outreach to stakeholders that could directly or indirectly be affected by the legislation was conducted by local wilderness advocates, and also exhaustively by Congressman Salazar's office. Congressman Salazar and his staff, both in the region and in Washington, deserve much commendation for the painstaking work they carried out to consult with, and respond to, anyone with a stake in these designations. For example, Mr. Salazar's staff consulted every livestock operator with a permit in the proposed areas, contacted the owners of private land inside the areas (mostly patented mining claims) by mail, and reviewed the proposal with water right holders, recreation interests, State agencies, and local governments. Numerous adjustments were made to the areas in the bill to accommodate concerns of these parties. Just a few examples follow.

The Sheep Mountain area was originally proposed for – with strong local support – designation as wilderness. Early in the outreach process, wilderness advocates were approached by the helicopter-supported skiing company Helitrax, who informed us that Sheep Mountain was the heart of their operation, in which they land helicopters to drop off skiers. This particular use would not be allowed in a wilderness and therefore a compromise was crafted to accommodate this use while protecting the wild character of Sheep Mountain via a Special Management Area. This also includes a provision that would designate the area as wilderness if the company ever were to cease operations in the area.

Another example of Congressman Salazar's efforts to make the legislation work for stakeholders is with the Towns of Telluride and Ophir. Both Towns had either historic or potential new water supply facilities in the proposed areas (Telluride in the proposed Liberty Bell addition to Mt. Sneffels Wilderness, and Ophir in the Sheep Mountain SMA); Mr. Salazar's staff worked closely with staff from both Towns to adjust boundaries to make sure that designations wouldn't interfere with the development or operation of these water supplies.

Motorized recreation is an important piece of the recreational landscape in the San Juan Mountains, and thousands of visitors come each year to experience the Ophir Pass jeep road and Alpine Loop. Congressman Salazar went to great lengths to ensure that motorized routes would not be closed by the legislation, and boundaries were drawn or adjusted meticulously to achieve that. For example, the boundaries of McKenna Peak and Naturita Canyon were reduced significantly from what was originally proposed to eliminate known motorized routes. Similarly, the boundaries of the Whitehouse and Last Dollar additions to the Mt. Sneffels Wilderness were adjusted to provide for snowmobile access to backcountry huts operated by San Juan Huts for stocking and maintenance.

Another example relates to concerns with proposed wilderness and SMA boundaries brought forth by staff from the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forest. A number of boundary adjustment recommendations were made to improve manageability or to eliminate specific potential conflicts, and these were incorporated into the legislation; we thank the Forest Service for its knowledgeable advice and help on refining this important legislation.

On another recreation issue, the course of the renowned Hard Rock 100 footrace runs through two of the areas in the bill. A non-profit entity, the Hard Rock brings about 130 runners to the San Juan Mountains each summer to compete on backcountry trails and high mountain passes. No facilities are placed within proposed wilderness, and travel is by foot only. Although the National Forest Service Manual prohibits competitive events in designated wilderness, and we generally support that prohibition, neither Congressman Salazar nor wilderness advocates believe this particular race is inappropriate, since the fundamental activity, running, is completely compatible with wilderness, no other non-conforming uses are associated with the event, and the race has a long-established history in this area. Guidance for the decision to allow the race to continue was found in Chairman Rahall's Wild Monongahela Wilderness legislation, enacted earlier this year as part of the Omnibus Public Lands legislation.

Although southwest Colorado makes important contributions to energy production, the areas in this legislation are not part of that. No existing oil and gas leases are affected by the proposed designations, and exploratory wells recently drilled near McKenna Peak have not discovered developable deposits. A number of other adjustments were made to the legislation, assuring a steadily increasing degree of support throughout the outreach and vetting process.

Support for the San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act

The result of the consultation with numerous stakeholders and adjustments made to the proposal is legislation that enjoys support both deep and broad. Written support for the legislation has been received from:

- San Miguel County Board of County Commissioners
- Ouray County Board of County Commissioners
- San Juan County Board of County Commissioners
- Town of Telluride
- Town of Ophir
- Town of Mountain Village

- Town of Norwood
- Town of Ridgway
- City of Ouray
- San Miguel County Open Space Commission
- San Miguel Conservation Foundation
- Telluride Tourism Board
- Telluride Open Space Commission
- Rancher and grazing permittee Liza Clark
- Hidden Lakes Home Owners Association
- San Bernardo Home Owners Association
- Many adjacent landowners
- Telluride Helitrax
- Hard Rock 100 Endurance Run
- San Miguel County Sheriff
- Prominent members of the local mountain biking community
- Numerous local, regional, and national conservation and recreation organizations.

I hope that the information and history included here will be of help with Committee members as they consider the merits of H.R. 3914. The Wilderness Society along with all the other supporters of this legislation stand ready to help in any way, and we encourage the Members of this Subcommittee and the full Natural Resources Committee to support this legislation, and report it expeditiously for consideration by the full House.

I'd like to again thank Congressman Salazar for his excellent work in crafting this legislation, and also thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to speak on H.R. 3914.