

Media Memorandum:
Colorado BLM Reverses Six-Year Citizens' Wilderness Policy
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The Bureau of Land Management Colorado State Office has issued new guidance on how to approve new development inside the long-standing and popularly supported Citizens' Wilderness Proposal. The state policy implements a set of top-down directives from the BLM Washington DC Office to prohibit any future agency consideration of wilderness protections for millions of acres of qualifying BLM lands.

Colorado's public land jewels threatened by this policy reversal include Snaggletooth, Granite Creek, Roan Plateau and Vermillion Basin. All told, the effect of this rescission is to allow loss of wilderness values on over 600,000 acres of wilderness quality lands, and to preclude the BLM from ever again recommending Wilderness Study Area (WSA) status to deserving lands.

The Colorado Policy: 1997-2003.

The "Colorado Policy" outlined Colorado State BLM office's wilderness review procedure. It was born in 1997 and has been utilized by every subsequent BLM State Director to determine if proposed wilderness lands merited additional review prior to forever committing them to development.

The Colorado Policy embodies a "look before you leap" approach, meaning that when the BLM or the public provides documentation of wilderness values, the BLM must pause and consider such before implementing an action that will irreversibly or irretrievably impact these values. It established a fair and public process to review agency lands with potential wilderness characteristics, a process that has been successfully upheld by the Interior Board of Land Appeals.

The Colorado policy worked so well that it was used as the basis for BLM's National Wilderness Handbook, adopted in 2000. The Bush Administration rescinded the BLM *Wilderness Inventory and Study Procedures Handbook* in a settlement between then-Utah governor Michael Leavitt and Interior Secretary Gale Norton in April 2003. In this settlement, the Department of Interior effectively reversed over 10 years of BLM policy by determining that the BLM does not have legal authority to conduct inventories or recommend for designation agency lands worthy of protection as wilderness.

1997-2003 Colorado Policy:

- The Colorado Policy did not create new wilderness study areas; it only required that BLM take a second look at wilderness possibilities BEFORE committing public resources to development.
- The Colorado Policy was a state-based solution to legitimate resource conflicts on public lands; it required BLM to consider relevant new information and determine if land use plans were current to reflect that information.
- Where BLM has taken a second look at proposed wilderness lands it has agreed with the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal more often than not.
- The Colorado Policy is a fair and open process that has been successfully upheld in federal court and by the Interior Board of Land Appeals.

Citizens' Wilderness Proposal constitutes updated information and changed circumstances

Several environmental groups—including the Colorado Environmental Coalition and EarthJustice—have challenged this settlement. According to the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) BLM is required to maintain “. . . on a continuing basis an inventory of all public lands and their resource and other values (including but not limited to, outdoor recreation and scenic values), giving priority to areas of critical environmental concern.”

This requirement to base land use decisions on current information and circumstances obligates BLM to consider wilderness qualities where they exist. Protection of such lands as WSAs is a legitimate and important tool for BLM to retain. Instead, the new policy will allow BLM to manage non-WSA agency lands for all types of uses—oil and gas drilling, logging, grazing, off-road vehicle recreation, etc.—every use EXCEPT recommending them for wilderness designation. It also makes it more difficult for the BLM to fully consider citizens' inventory information before allowing development.

Colorado BLM land use plans—from a bygone era

- BLM's land use plans across the state—mostly from the 1980's—are outdated and have not considered new information and circumstances.
- BLM has admitted that some of its land use plans do not adequately protect wilderness characteristics in some of the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal areas and that its plans must be updated.
- When the local BLM office tried to initiate a land use plan amendment for several areas identified by the agency as wilderness-eligible, the Interior Department in Washington DC intervened and stopped the amendment. Vermillion Basin in northwest Colorado is one of these areas.

Colorado citizens have in recent decades spent hundreds of days hiking and documenting wilderness character for undeveloped areas across the state. In addition to 801,000 acres of Wilderness Study Areas originally designated by the BLM, citizen groups have identified another 600,000 acres that qualify for protection, including many places that the Colorado BLM has since agreed have wilderness values. In 1999, Colorado Congresswoman Diana DeGette first introduced landmark wilderness legislation that would designate many of the lands in the Citizens' Proposal as wilderness.

The rescission of the Colorado Policy puts at serious risk areas such as Vermillion Basin, a stunning landscape of multi-colored badlands, deep canyons, and ancient Indian writings, in far northwest Colorado. Although this area was overlooked in the BLM's original inventory in the early 1980s, the BLM redid its inventory and in 2001 agreed with citizens that Vermillion Basin possessed true wilderness character. The BLM was poised to update the area's management plan to consider granting more protection for the area when the Bush Administration stalled this public planning process soon after taking office.

Additional Information Available

For a map of wilderness quality lands in Colorado now at risk, please contact Brandon Jett at maps@cecenviro.org or 970-243-0002.

For additional background materials please contact, at the numbers above-

Utah settlement and Washington DC anti-wilderness directives—Ted Zukoski; Wilderness Inventory Handbook—Vera Smith; Colorado State Policy (1997-2003), new state wilderness guidance, and Citizens' Wilderness Proposal—Pete Kolbenschlager