

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

September 30, 2003

**For a map of Colorado's special places that could be harmed  
by this policy, go to:  
[www.ourcolorado.org/alerts/052303\\_alert\\_wilderness\\_map.htm](http://www.ourcolorado.org/alerts/052303_alert_wilderness_map.htm)**

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# **America's Wildlands Stripped of Future Protection**

*Bush Administration Removes 600,000 acres of Colorado public lands from Wilderness Consideration*

In a stealth, unpublicized move, the Bush Administration has quietly withdrawn millions of acres of public lands across America—including 600,000 acres in Colorado—from future consideration as wilderness. In Colorado, places like Vermillion Basin, a rugged landscape of ancient rock art and archeological sites, were suddenly stripped bare of potential protections by yesterday's top-down directive from the Washington Office of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

"It's a national disgrace and an incredible failure of stewardship," said Charlie Kerr with the Concerned Citizens Resource Association and a leader of the Mesa County Wilderness Coalition. "Surely BLM should at least be able to consider the possibility of future wilderness protection. They have no problem planning future gas fields. They should plan for meaningful protection of special areas too. This is not a balanced approach, but a huge shift that favors development over preservation."

All told, over 600,000 acres of roadless, undeveloped BLM lands in Colorado will no longer warrant a second look by BLM prior to opening them up to industrial development, dirt bikes, mining and other harmful activities. Hidden red rock wonderlands like Granite Creek Proposed Wilderness and ponderosa pine-clad canyon of Snaggletooth Proposed Wilderness along the Dolores River are affected by this decision. The majority of BLM lands in Colorado and across much of the West are already open to energy development. By contrast relatively few areas are eligible for wilderness designation. The Colorado Citizens' Wilderness Proposal, for example, would designate only 15% of Colorado's BLM lands as wilderness.

"BLM is shifting the balance of land management from one where wilderness was on an equal playing field to one where wilderness is ranked below oil drilling, logging, and all other extractive uses," said Pete Kolbensschlag with the Colorado Environmental Coalition. "DC is telling the agency and local citizens that the one use that the agency will not plan for on public lands is future wilderness protection. These are the public's lands and the Bush Administration should manage them for the public's benefit. Instead they are giving away America's lands to their powerful industry friends."

The new national policy guidance issued yesterday prevents the BLM from inventorying or protecting wilderness-quality lands—a move that formalizes a backroom court settlement made between the Administration and Utah Governor Mike Leavitt this past April. This new directive by the Department of the Interior for its land managers reverses decades of wilderness policy and puts the interests of drilling, mining, logging and road construction ahead of the public interest. This directive goes beyond what even Interior Secretary James Watt proposed to do during the Reagan administration, and is the latest of a number of steps the Bush Administration has taken to weaken protection for America's wilderness areas.

The two instructional memoranda (IM 2003-274, IM 2003-275) issued by DC also reverse a seven-year-old Colorado policy that directed BLM staff to consider wilderness potential on lands included in the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal and in Federal wilderness legislation, such as the Colorado Wilderness Act of 2003 sponsored by Colorado Congresswoman Diana DeGette.

"Lands included in the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal deserve a thorough review by the BLM before the agency authorizes new industrial uses that degrade an area's wildness," said Suzanne Jones of The Wilderness Society's Four Corner Office, "and this "Second Look" policy has worked well in Colorado for the last seven years. Now the Bush Administration says that the BLM cannot even look at lands for wilderness potential when they are updating their management plans. It defies common sense and sound management."

Under the old Colorado policy, and before pursuing any new damaging activities, BLM agreed to fairly consider citizen-proposed wilderness lands for potential wilderness resources that were overlooked in BLM's original wilderness inventory two decades ago. In most cases where such lands were reviewed, the BLM agreed with citizen groups' findings that the previously overlooked areas did have wilderness character that might warrant protection. In a few cases, however, BLM disagreed, and these lands have since been made available for other uses such as drilling and motorized use. Under the Bush Administration's new policy, citizen-proposed lands will not get a second look, nor will they ever even be considered by the BLM for protection of their wilderness character.

One of the special areas placed on the chopping block by this new policy is Roan Plateau, a stunning area near Rifle that is known for its outstanding scenery and wildlife, but which is also at the top of the administration's target list for oil and gas drilling. Under this new policy, the BLM will be barred from even considering protecting the wilderness character of the cliffs and top of the plateau in its management planning process currently underway.

"BLM spent a year inventorying Roan Plateau for potential wilderness, something it had never done for these public lands, and found thousands and thousands of acres that qualify. Now they are throwing out all that hard work, the work of citizens, elected officials and agency staff, and refusing to even consider the possibility of wilderness protections," said Clare Bastable with the Colorado Mountain Club. "This decision will likely lead to new gas wells on the Roan Plateau, new gas wells on the Grand Hogback, but no more possibility of additional wilderness. Extractive industries will benefit but our landscapes and our quality-of-life will be the victims."

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*As of September 30, the Instructional Memoranda were not available on the BLM's Internet site's list of IM's, last updated in July. To receive a .pdf file via E Mail, please contact Pete Kolbensschlag at [pete1@cecenviro.org](mailto:pete1@cecenviro.org) or at the number above.*