

AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

REGULAR MEETING DATE: September 8, 2010

AGENDA ITEM TITLE: Resolution Supporting the *Colorado Wilderness Act of 2009*

STAFF RESPONSIBLE: Ellen Sassano, Senior Long Range Planner

ISSUE STATEMENT: At the request of the Board, Staff has drafted the attached resolution in support of Representative Diana DeGette's Wilderness Bill, the *Colorado Wilderness Act of 2009*. Based on direction from the Board, the resolution will be amended as necessary and put into final form for signature; and forwarded to Congresswoman DeGette. Letters received from the public regarding the proposed legislation have been attached to this memorandum as reference.

LINK TO STRATEGIC PLAN: The resolution supports the strategic goal of Environmental Protection.

BUDGETARY IMPACT: None

RECOMMENDED BOCC ACTION: Direct Staff to amend the Resolution as necessary, prepare for Chair signature, and forward to Congresswoman Degette.

ATTACHMENTS:

Exhibit "A" Resolution
Exhibit "B" August 10, 2010 Letter re: Wilderness Bill
Exhibit "C" July 28, 2010 Letter re: Wilderness Bill

EXHIBIT "A"

**A RESOLUTION OF THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS OF
PITKIN COUNTY, COLORADO, SUPPORTING THE COLORADO
WILDERNESS ACT OF 2009**

RESOLUTION NO. _____-2010

RECITALS

1. The Colorado Wilderness Act of 2009 contains two areas in Pitkin County, Assignment Ridge and the Eagle Mountain/Maroon Bells Addition. Both are stunning areas worthy of Congressional Wilderness designation which results in permanent protection of the natural, scenic, recreational and biological values of federal lands.
2. We reaffirm our earlier support (Resolution #98-236) for the Colorado Wilderness Act of 2009.
3. Wilderness lands are highly valued by Colorado residents and visitors for activities such as hunting, grazing, hiking, horseback riding, boating, camping, fishing, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, wildlife viewing and birdwatching.
4. Wilderness contributes not only to our quality of life but also to our economy. Pitkin County's economy is strongly supported by tourism, and wilderness areas are a critical component of the draw to our region. Wilderness also offers protection of watersheds, clean water and clean air.
5. Wilderness areas provide critical large tracts of undisturbed contiguous lands that support wildlife habitat and ecosystems that sustain wildlife migration, health and a diversity of species.
6. Regarding the Assignment Ridge Area, the Colorado Division of Wildlife states that, this area "...should remain roadless with no new trails or road construction in order to protect its rich diversity of wildlife and habitat values including big game winter range, elk summer concentration and production areas, as well as provide a good quality hunting experience." A wilderness designation will maintain the integrity of the wildlife resource.
7. Many mountain ranches, which support a growing local food movement and provide the additional benefit of a rural setting appreciated by the public, are dependent upon federal land grazing permits. Permit areas on Federal lands within the Assignment Ridge Area have been found to be most productive when they are undisturbed by the increasing pressure of mechanized and motorized recreation, as they would be with a Wilderness designation.

- 8. To facilitate viable agriculture and the benefits it provides to the public, Pitkin County supports the request of local grazing permittees to explicitly permit the continuation of historic uses and access for purposes of operation, repair and maintenance of structures and facilities used for grazing.
- 9. Pitkin County, through its Open Space and Trails program, has invested significant public funds in the conservation of a 4,800 acre land mass known as Jerome Park, in the Assignment Ridge Area. The conservation easement protects the substantial open space, agricultural, wildlife and recreational values of the land. Oil and gas development in the Assignment Ridge area, that surrounds and is accessed through Jerome Park, would have adverse impacts on this conserved land. Scenic impacts, traffic impacts, disturbance of intact wildlife ranges are a few of the more understood impacts that would detract from the goal of the Jerome Park project. We support a wilderness designation for adjacent federal public lands in the Assignment Ridge area to protect the values associated with this substantial public investment.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of County Commissioners of Pitkin County Colorado that it hereby supports the Colorado Wilderness Act of 2009, particularly wilderness designation of the Assignment Ridge and Eagle Mountain areas.

INTRODUCED, READ AND ADOPTED ON THE 8TH DAY OF SEPTEMBER, 2010.

ATTEST:

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
OF PITKIN COUNTY, COLORADO

Jeanette Jones
Deputy Clerk & Recorder

By _____
George Newman, Chair

Date: _____

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

MANAGER APPROVAL:

John Ely, County Attorney

Hilary Fletcher, County Manager

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EXHIBIT "B"

August 12, 2010

Board of County Commissioners,

We are writing you to urge your support for Representative DeGette's wilderness bill.

Our ranch is adjacent to Assignment Ridge and as you know, it is entirely under conservation easement. Our earliest grazing permit is on Assignment Ridge. We also have 80 acres under conservation easement on the west side of Assignment, adjacent to the 4800 acres under conservation easement we own jointly with the North Thompson Cattlemen. This is an important swath of land that is part of the Thompson Creek wildlife corridor.

As ranchers, we feel more threatened by increased mechanized and motorized recreation than by a wilderness designation. We are attempting to keep our historical uses on the Mt. Sopris allotment (our BLM permit on Assignment), and on the Coal Basin permit if they become wilderness.

Our permit on Assignment Ridge is critical to our ranching operation as it allows us to get the cows on grass the end of May when hay supplies are dwindling and before the forest permits are ready. This is hot, dry country. One mountain biker can send them trotting back to water where they lie around on the ditch bank. Grazing management is challenged by the presence of humans.

Wildlife is also negatively affected by mountain bikers and ATV users on the BLM part of Assignment Ridge. Deer linger in the hayfields, making it difficult to grow a summer hay crop. They do not move to Assignment Ridge like they have historically, because, like cattle they experience constant disturbance. This migration corridor connecting Grand Mesa to the Elk Mountains should be undisturbed from November through June to provide winter habitat and allow for the spring migration.

We realize that public lands are managed for multiple use, but not necessarily for all uses everywhere. Our summer grazing permits on Thompson Creek is more easily managed for different recreational and agricultural activities.

Ranching remains important and viable, but it is challenging. The public enjoys the scenery of mountain ranches. An important local grass fed beef market has been established in the valley. But recreation will have to be managed much as ranches were under the Taylor Grazing Act of the 1930's. Ranchers did not want regulation then, but it is hard to imagine grazing without it today.

Please support Diana DeGette's wilderness bill.

Sincerely,

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Marj Perry and Bill Fales

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EXHIBIT "C"

North Thompson Cattlemen
Cold Mountain Ranch
4239 Hwy 133,
Carbondale, CO 81623

Jen Clanahan
Senior Policy Advisor
U.S. Representative Diana DeGette, CO
1600 Grant Street, Suite 202
Denver, CO 80203
Jennifer.Clanahan@mail.house.gov

July 28, 2010

To Whom it May Concern:

We are writing to you concerning the wilderness designation of Assignment Ridge which is part of both the Hidden Gems Wilderness proposal and Representative Diana DeGette's Wilderness proposal.

The North Thompson Cattlemen own Jerome Park; a 4,800 acre parcel on the west side of Assignment Ridge adjacent to our forest service Thompson Creek grazing permit. It is entirely under conservation easement. We also have USFS grazing permits on Coal Basin.

Assignment Ridge and Thompson Creek BLM are important to our grazing as well as important to wildlife. These areas are significant habitat for wildlife and part of a migration corridor that connects Grand Mesa to the Elk Mountains.

Although we are not looking for more bureaucratic rules, we feel Wilderness designation on Assignment Ridge and Thompson Creek BLM will protect grazing, wildlife, and wildlife habitat. As ranchers/grazing permittees, we increasingly feel pressured by increased mechanized and motorized recreation. We appreciate your help in addressing this concern. We also appreciate your ongoing help to ensure grazing permittees historical motorized and mechanized uses in Wilderness as affirmed in the Congressional Grazing Guidelines and later reaffirmations in the Colorado Wilderness Act of 1980 and the Arizona Desert Wilderness Act of 1990.

We have been meeting with Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) regarding common areas of concern for wildlife, wildlife habitat and grazing. Cattle and wildlife are pushed off of areas where there are extensive motorized and mechanized recreational trail systems. The cattle won't stay in areas heavily impacted and this makes it harder to manage according to annual management plans. This has happened on the Crown and Red Hill and they are basically sacrifice zones for mountain bikes.

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The CDOW is also very concerned about the potential of mountain bike trails and dirt bike tracks in these areas, as the Crown and Red Hill were lower elevation mule deer significant habitat and about the only area of this lower elevation habitat left in the valley is Thompson Creek BLM and Assignment Ridge. The private ranchlands are also impacted as the elk and deer are being pushed off onto the private ranchlands for an even greater period of time. This makes it very hard to grow forage and hay for the winter and spring. Also of concern is the loss of forage on Assignment Ridge and Thompson Creek BLM as the more motorized and mechanized trails are created the less forage that remains. There are also concerns of erosion. The access to Thompson Creek BLM is very steep. This would be the same for Assignment Ridge.

The CDOW in public documents regarding the Inventoried Roadless Area, Assignment Ridge, have stated, this "is a large section of relatively undisturbed habitat. The area serves as elk and mule deer summer range, elk summer concentration, elk and mule deer winter range, severe winter range and winter concentration area, elk production area, black bear summer range and fall concentration area, Bald Eagle winter foraging, turkey overall range, as well as habitat for a variety of avian and small mammal species". This same habitat exists on the Thompson Creek BLM area of Assignment Ridge. CDOW has stated "this IRA should remain roadless with no new trails or road construction in order to protect its rich diversity of wildlife and habitat values including big game winter range, elk summer concentration and production areas, as well as provide a good quality hunting experience".

We understand that the local BLM office has 4 alternative plans for mountain bike and dirt bike trail systems on the Thompson Creek BLM along with alternatives that consider the wilderness quality values and grazing of this area. These will be evaluated during the upcoming Resource Management Plan public comment period. We are asking that the wilderness quality values and grazing of this area be given the highest priority. We believe there is no legal mechanized and motorized recreational access to this area. The steep "access" on the west side has been opened and closed numerous times over the years. The "main access" from the north, off 108 Road, was illegally constructed in the 1980's. It is a bandit trail. Many of these "roads" the bikers ride lead to private property.

Ranching remains important and viable in the Roaring Fork and Crystal River valleys, but it is challenging. The public enjoys the scenery of mountain ranches and tourists visit, in part, because of the rural setting. Private ranchlands provide wildlife habitat, open space and contribute to the economic fabric of the valley. Besides the North Thompson Cattlemen, the Crystal River Ranch owned by Sue Rodgers has grazing permits on Thompson Creek BLM and Assignment Ridge. There are at least a couple dozen families that are dependent for their livelihood on the ranches with grazing permits in these areas.

The Roaring Fork Valley and Carbondale supports local ranchers and the local food movement. Crystal River Meats, in Carbondale is selling local grass fed beef. The Jacober Brothers who own Crystal River Meats are one of the grazing permittees on Assignment Ridge and they purchase the cattle for their store from several of the other

permittees. Beef is sold to individuals through the store and farmer's markets and to valley restaurants between Glenwood Springs and Aspen. Crystal River Meats along with other farmers and ranchers in the valley are hard at work to increase the local food available and these permittees play an important role in that opportunity.

Given that the access to the bike trails on Assignment Ridge were constructed illegally, that the area is important to wildlife and ranchers, that mechanized and motorized recreation including mountain bikes, dirt bikes and ATV's have a negative impact on ranching and wildlife, and that there are many other established mechanized trails, I hope you will support wilderness designation of this area.

We realize that public lands are managed for multiple use, but not necessarily for all uses everywhere. Grazing and wildlife would be significantly negatively impacted if mechanized and motorized trails were allowed on Assignment Ridge and Thompson Creek BLM. The summer grazing permits on Thompson Creek are more easily managed for various recreational and agricultural activities as well as logging.

Sincerely,

William E.L. Fales, President North Thompson Cattlemen's Association

North Thompson Cattlemen's Association members include:

Ted and Tammy Nieslanik
Paul and Celia Nieslanik
Bill Fales and Marj Perry
Mark Nieslanik
TyBar Ranch
Jacober Brothers
Marty and Jerilyn Nieslanik
John and Theresa Nieslanik
John Burtard -- rider for association

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