

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Witness Testimony

Testimony Before the
House Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Forest and Forest Health

Regarding the
Spanish Peaks Wilderness Act of 1999, H.R. 898

Congressmen Scott McInnis (CO)

Thursday, April 22, 1999

Madame Chairman, I would like to start by thanking you and the Committee for your prompt attention to this legislation which I introduced last month, the Spanish Peaks Wilderness Act of 1999. Madam Chairman, today I am hear to discuss a bill to give permanent protection as wilderness to the heart of the Spanish Peaks area in Colorado. I plan to shorten my statement, and I would ask that the full written statement appear in the record.

The Spanish Peaks Wilderness Act of 1999 is cosponsored by several of my colleagues from Colorado, including Mr. Schaffer, whose district includes the portion of the Spanish Peaks within Las Animas county. I am also pleased to be joined by Mr. Hefley, Mr. Tancredo and Mr. Mark Udall of Colorado. I greatly appreciate their assistance and support.

Across the Capitol, Senator Allard has introduced an identical companion bill and I would like to extend my appreciation to the Senator for his active support of this worthwhile legislation.

I would also like to offer a note of appreciation and thanks to the former Members of Congress whose efforts made today's legislation possible. Approximately twenty years ago, in 1986, Senator Armstrong of Colorado initiated this process by proposing protected status and management for the Spanish Peaks. His efforts set in place the foundation upon which today's bill is built. Former Congressman Skaggs from Colorado's Second District, has also played a great part in the process of this wilderness designation. Together, Mr. Skaggs and I introduced

this legislation in the 105th Congress, the bill passed the House but due to time constraints did not pass the Senate. The efforts by both of these individual legislators have helped make this proposal possible.

H.R. 898 would designate approximately, 18,000 acres in Colorado's San Isabel National Forest, located between La Veta, Colorado and Trinidad, Colorado along the Huerfano-Las Animas county line, as the Spanish Peaks Wilderness Area. The Spanish Peaks themselves are a National Landmark, in recognition of their beauty and grandeur, due to the unique pattern of volcanic dikes radiating outward from the peaks like the spokes of a wheel. The East and West Spanish Peaks constitute the easternmost peaks of the Rocky Mountains. These attributes create unique conditions for endemic plant communities while the lofty 13,626-foot West Spanish Peak creates a prominent landmark visible across the high plains for many miles and due to the fact that Peak's are a pure headwaters area, no issues surrounding downstream water rights will arise.

This bill includes most of the lands originally recommended for wilderness by the Forest Service, but with boundary revisions that will exclude some private lands. It is important to note that extensive efforts have been made to address local concerns about the wilderness designation, including: 1) adjusting the boundary slightly to exclude certain lands that are likely to have the capacity for mineral production; and 2) excluding from the wilderness a road that local residents use for access to the beauty of the Spanish Peaks. As a result of these efforts the environmental community, the local citizens and the locally elected officials, including the Huerfano and Las Animas County Commissioners have voiced their support for the legislation.

The lands covered by this bill are not only striking for their beauty and value but also for recreation. They fully merit the protection that will come from their designation as wilderness. The bill itself is very simple. It would just add the Spanish Peaks area to the list of areas designated as wilderness by the Colorado Wilderness Act of 1993. As a result, all the provisions of the act -- including the provisions related to water -- would apply to the Spanish Peaks area just as they do to the other areas on that list. Like all the areas now on that list, the Spanish Peaks area covered by this bill is a headwaters area, which for all practical purposes eliminates the possibility of water conflicts. There are no water diversions within the area.

Madam Chairman, enactment of this Spanish Peaks bill will not be the last step in protecting the Federal lands in Colorado. As this bill demonstrates, when an area is appropriate for wilderness designation and when all the outstanding issues have been satisfactorily addressed, the Colorado delegation will respond with appropriate legislation. I would also note that other protection short of the absolute wilderness designation may be appropriate in certain cases, and I would encourage the Congress, Coloradans, the counties, local users and interests who would be impacted to consider this possibility when discussing how to best utilize public lands within Colorado.

I would like to take this opportunity to discuss certain perceptions regarding the need to preserve and protect our nation's lands. The fact that federal land is not designated as wilderness does not mean that the land is not protected. An entire arsenal of tools is available to the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Parks Service to help protect and preserve the integrity of our lands.

Local control is a privilege that is already hard to come by and difficult to keep. Once an area is designated as wilderness, the option of local control is no longer available. The lands are then governed by a federal statute and by agencies based, here, in Washington DC. For that reason, in my opinion, any wilderness proposal must carefully consider and consult local interests before proposing broad wilderness designations.

In my support for public land-use policy, I have sought to achieve a common sense balance between local control, multiple use, and protecting Colorado's resources. I have and will continue to support wilderness in Colorado that is well considered and has local support, such as this Spanish Peaks legislation. I will continue to work to achieve appropriate levels of protection for the pristine and beautiful areas within Colorado.

Madam Chairman, I close by urging the Congress to act without delay to pass this important measure for the Spanish Peaks area of Colorado, and would like to thank this Committee for the speed with which it has scheduled this hearing and giving me the opportunity to testify today.

Thank you.

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