

September 26, 2024

Dear Senator Bennet,

We, the undersigned, write in strong support of the public lands and watershed protections included in the Gunnison Outdoor Resources Protection (GORP) Act. In the North Fork Valley, we know firsthand that protected public lands contribute to a healthy environment, our quality of life, and local economies on the Western Slope. Some of us have lived here for generations, others have joined our communities more recently, but we all agree that opportunities for outdoor recreation, wildlife conservation, and protections for clean water resources help support our way of life and directly contribute to the success of the many small farms, ranches, and other business throughout the area.

Specifically, we support in the GORP Act the inclusion of wilderness additions, special management areas, and mineral withdrawal areas in the North Fork watershed. These areas include the Clear Fork Special Management Area, Pilot Knob Special Management Area, Beckwiths Special Management Area, Horse Ranch Park Recreation Area, Munsey Creek Wildlife Conservation Area, Lamborn Wilderness Addition, and Erickson Springs Wilderness Addition. All of these areas are deserving of protection for their ability to improve water resources, wildlife habitat, and recreation opportunities to communities in the North Fork and Lower Gunnison watersheds. We also support the GORP Act provision to provide for continued public access to the Gunnison Forks (Pleasure Park) boat ramp.

Perhaps most important to those living in Delta County is inclusion of the North Fork Valley Watershed withdrawal in the GORP Act. As you know, this oil and gas withdrawal would apply to many of the Bureau of Land Management surface-managed areas in the County, while Currant Creek, Electric Mountain, and Elk Park Roadless Areas in the Grand, Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests would benefit from a No Surface Occupancy restriction. While this withdrawal will not fully protect the entire North Fork Valley watershed from future oil and gas development, it represents a significant step toward protecting critical areas like the Town of Paonia's source water area and Jumbo Mountain which had been previously open to oil and gas development.

The public lands and waterways of the North Fork Valley surround our communities and connect us. Protecting these connections and reducing carbon emission is especially critical for climate change adaptation and mitigation. Thank you for your work to support locally-driven conservation solutions on the Western Slope and elsewhere in Colorado. We encourage you to schedule a hearing and pass the GORP Act without delay and are looking forward to the day when these protections are permanently signed into law.

Signed,

Hannah Stevens
Executive Director
Western Slope Conservation Center

“The Colorado Farm & Food Alliance is a Delta County based group that works to strengthen the local food movement, support sustainable rural communities, and provide a platform for effective advocacy in support of food security and a sustainable future. Protecting public lands in the North Fork Valley's headwaters, including those identified in the Gunnison Outdoor Resources Protection Act helps strengthen food security and supports the health of our farms and ranches downstream. Drought and climate change pose severe risk to Colorado agriculture and food systems. The GORP Act helps address the climate emergency and it would protect our outdoor resources through the sensible conservation of key public lands in the Gunnison River watershed. Limiting the further expansion of oil and gas development by withdrawing these lands from mineral leasing, and safeguarding their important backcountry resources, is a bulwark against the worsening climate crisis, and would also better protect our water supply areas. The Colorado Farm and Food Alliance supports the full protection of all the lands being considered.” **Pete Kolbenschlag, Executive Director, Colorado Farm and Food Alliance**

“The Valley Organic Growers Association has a membership of over 100 organic farms, ranches, orchards and agricultural-related businesses and advocates, representing a vibrant and sustainable local economy. Our guiding principles include the maintenance of healthy soil, air and water for the production of nutritious food. Our farmer's commitment to quality and the stewardship of clean soil, water and air are crucial to consumers and their perception and choice to buy clean, organic food. The GORP Act furthers VOGA members' ability to produce healthy food by better protecting our air, water, and soil, and we encourage you to include areas in Delta County in the act to enhance these protections.” **Board of Directors, Valley Organic Growers Association**

“It is important that we build on the 20-year Thompson Divide Administrative Withdrawal to preserve connected landscapes and extend those protections westward into Delta County. The Upper North Fork Valley's watershed, roadless areas, prime hiking, camping, skiing, hunting and fishing sites are located within lands designated high development potential for oil and gas. The withdrawal of low and moderate development potential minerals in the North Fork Valley is a step in the right direction.” **Natasha Ledger, Executive Director, Citizen for a Healthy Community**

“Slow Food Western Slope, a non-profit organization, envisions a world in which all people can eat food that is good for them, good for the people who grow it and good for the planet: good, clean and fair. We promote and support over 60 farmers, orchardists, ranchers, agricultural businesses and winemakers of the North Fork Valley - all of which depend on good and clean water, air and soil. We support the GORP Act, since it is designed to protect critical headwaters for the Gunnison Basin and the Colorado River, which flow into our Valley.” **Jim Brett, Leader, Slow Food Western Slope**

“It's pretty simple, here at Paonia United Brewing Co we rely on clean water to produce the best quality beer we can make. So we are huge supporters of the GORP Act! Cheers!” **Shawn Larson, Owner, Brewer, Paonia United Brewing and Chrysalis Barrel Aged Beers**



"As an outdoor recreation business owner in the North Fork Valley, it would be helpful to have permanent protections for our local public lands. These special places are cherished by locals, and a growing number of out-of-town visitors alike." **Daniel Roman, Owner, Western Slope Stand Up Paddle**