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Before the
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Concerning
H.R. 823, “The Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy Act”
April 2, 2019

Chairwoman Haaland, Ranking Member Young and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the views of the Department of Agriculture on H.R. 823, the “Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy Act.”

H.R. 823 includes provisions that pertain to the management of the National Forests in Colorado including the designation of new Wilderness areas, establishment of recreation management areas, designation of wildlife conservation areas, mineral withdrawals, boundary modifications, transfer of National Forest land, and other administrative provisions.

We thank Congressman Neguse for his support of Federal lands in Colorado and appreciate the local involvement and stakeholder contributions to this bill. Generally, the Forest Service supports provisions of this legislation implementing land management practices that are consistent with applicable forest plans and have broad based local support.

TITLE I—CONTINENTAL DIVIDE

Title I designates six Wilderness area additions, two Wildlife Conservation Areas, one Recreation Management Area, and the first of its kind National Historic Landscape. These areas are located on the White River National Forest, the most visited forest in the country. The landscapes are generally high elevation and attract millions of visitors wanting to enjoy the views and recreate as hunters, anglers, hikers, mountain bikers, skiers, and off-road riders. These areas also support sensitive ecosystems and diverse wildlife.

The proposed designations would permanently withdraw, subject to valid existing rights, all the National Forest System lands within these areas on the White River National Forest from entry, appropriation, or disposal under the public land laws; location, entry, and patent under the mining laws; and operation under the mineral leasing and geothermal leasing laws.

The Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness Additions

Section 102(a)(1) designates 6,876 acres of the White River National Forest, currently depicted as the “Proposed Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness”, for incorporation into and management as part of the existing -Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness designated by section 2(a)(18) of Public Law 103-77.

The Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness lies on the western flank of the Williams Fork Mountain Range three miles east of Silverthorne, Colorado, on the White River National Forest. The four proposed Wilderness additions encompass approximately 6,876 acres of National Forest System lands adjacent to the existing Wilderness. These additions include Ute Pass, Acorn Creek, Straight Creek, and Ptarmigan.

The Forest Plan recommends Wilderness designation for the 1,998 acre proposed Ute Pass Wilderness Addition and 838 acre proposed Acorn Creek Wilderness Addition. The Act proposes designation of an additional 862 acres to the Ute Pass Wilderness Addition and 301 acres of the Acorn Creek Addition; both areas are currently being managed for wildlife habitat.

The Forest Plan does not recommend either the proposed Ptarmigan Wilderness Addition or the Proposed Straight Creek Wilderness Addition for Wilderness designation. Wilderness designation in the Proposed Ptarmigan Wilderness Addition will limit management of wildlife habitat using motorized equipment, mechanical transport and installations. The configuration of the proposed Straight Creek Addition may also present management challenges in the future. As a result, the agency does not support the proposed addition of the Ptarmigan Addition or Straight Creek Wilderness Addition.

The Holy Cross Wilderness Addition

Section 102(a)(2) also designates 3,902 acres of the White River National Forest, currently depicted as the “Proposed Megan Dickie Wilderness Addition” for incorporation into the existing Holy Cross Wilderness designated by section 102(a)(5) of Public Law 96-560.

The Holy Cross Wilderness lies astride the Sawatch Mountain Range, six miles southwest of Vail, Colorado, on the White River and San Isabel National Forests.

The Forest Service has a unique concern regarding this area, as the area has a high probability of containing unexploded ordinance from the nearby WWII training site at Camp Hale. Mitigation of potential unexploded ordinance commonly requires motorized or mechanized equipment; and a Wilderness designation would potentially restrict this capability.

The Proposed Megan Dickie Wilderness Addition is a single parcel, encompassing approximately 3,902 acres of National Forest System lands adjacent to the existing Wilderness. The Forest Plan does not recommend any of this area for Wilderness designation given there are remnants of past timber harvests as well as the likelihood of unexploded ordinances in the area. As a result, the agency does not support the proposed addition of the Proposed Megan Dickie Wilderness Addition.

The Proposed Hoosier Ridge Wilderness

Section 102(a)(2) designates approximately 5,235 acres of the White River National Forest to be named the “Hoosier Ridge Wilderness” as depicted on the “proposed Tenmile Wilderness” map.

The Proposed Hoosier Ridge Wilderness would be located on the northwestern slope of the Continental Divide three miles south of Breckenridge. None of this area was recommended for Wilderness designation in the Forest Plan. However, 328 acres were set aside as a Research

Natural Area (RNA) and contain unique plants that contribute to the regional and national RNA system. Of the remaining area, 4,910 acres are currently managed for non-motorized backcountry recreation year-round; 3 acres are currently managed for motorized backcountry recreation year-round; and 12 acres of a private inholding. No mechanized recreation opportunities would be affected. The designation is largely consistent with current management. We would like to work with the bill sponsor and the committee to avoid future conflicts regarding access to private lands.

The Proposed Tenmile Wilderness

Section 102(a)(2) also designates approximately 7,606 acres of the White River National Forest to be named the “Tenmile Wilderness”, as depicted on the “proposed Tenmile Wilderness” map.

The proposed Tenmile Wilderness is located astride the Tenmile Mountain Range, 3 miles southwest of the town of Breckenridge on the White River National Forest. Currently the Forest Service manages this landscape through a variety of strategies including 3,788 acres for backcountry non-motorized recreation, 2,127 acres as a special interest area for protection of high elevation tundra plant communities, 99 acres in backcountry year-round motorized recreation, and 1,509 acres in generally undeveloped recreation which allows for some potential motorized use. Although these area designations may allow for the possibility of motorized or mechanized use, this Wilderness proposal does not include any areas where motorized or mechanized use are currently allowed under the Forest’s travel management plan. 73 acres are private or designated for other management in this area.

The Forest Service is concerned about manageability of the proposed southern Wilderness boundary. The 14,000-foot-tall Quandary Peak, just outside the proposed southern boundary, sees over 21,000 hikers annually. While the top of the peak is not within the proposed Wilderness boundary, the landing sites for helicopters which are needed for rescues several times a year are within the proposed boundary. The drainage to the north of Quandary Peak is McCullough Gulch, home to some spectacular geology and water features, and over 14,000 visitors annually. While the lower portions of the trail are not within the proposed Wilderness designation, the upper one and a half miles are. To the north, the drainage containing Spruce and Mohawk Lakes receives over 22,000 annual visitors. The current proposed Wilderness includes three high use trails that will not meet visitors’ expectations and agency standards for Wilderness.

The Forest Service does not support the proposed addition as it is currently written. The agency would like to work with the committee and bill sponsor to consider boundary adjustments to provide improved and consistent manageability for thousands of visitors.

The Eagles Nest Wilderness Additions

Section 102(a)(2) designates 9,419 acres of the White River National Forest, depicted as the “Proposed Freeman Creek Wilderness Addition” and the “Proposed Spraddle Creek Wilderness Addition”, to be incorporated into and managed as part of the “Eagles Nest Wilderness” designated by Public Law 94-352.

The Eagles Nest Wilderness lies astride the Gore Mountain Range just to the north of Vail, Colorado, and to the east of Silverthorne, Colorado, on the White River National Forest.

The Act would designate two separate parcels on the west side of the existing Wilderness area. The proposed designation would largely be consistent with current management.

The proposed Freeman Creek Wilderness Addition encompasses 1,144 acres of National Forest System lands. In the Forest Plan, 290 acres of the proposed addition are recommended for Wilderness designation. The remaining 850 acres are currently managed for non-motorized recreation opportunities and the four remaining acres are private lands. The Forest Service supports the addition of the 290 acres recommended for Wilderness in the Forest Plan. Further Wilderness designations in the proposed area present access issues including to private structures.

The proposed Spraddle Creek Wilderness Addition encompasses 8,362 acres. Of those, 872 acres are recommended for Wilderness designation under the Forest Plan. The Forest Service supports the addition of the 872 acres recommended for Wilderness. The agency does not support adding the remaining 7,490 acres as remnants from past forest management exist, along with continued access to a developed ski hut, which could impact the Wilderness character of the area. These areas also include forest and rangeland habitats that are actively managed for a variety of forest product and forest health purposes. Adding these areas will also remove 4,156 acres from consideration for commercial timber harvest and active forest management.

The Proposed Williams Fork Wilderness

Section 103 designates approximately 8,192 acres of the White River National Forest, depicted as the “Proposed Williams Fork Wilderness” as a potential Wilderness area. The Act also directs the Secretary to publish a determination regarding whether to authorize livestock grazing on vacant grazing allotments known as, the Big Hole Allotment and the Blue Ridge Allotment.

The Proposed Williams Fork Wilderness is 14 miles north of Silverthorne on the western slope of the Williams Mountain Range. None of this area was proposed for Wilderness designation in the Forest Plan given the presence of roads in the area. As a result, the agency does not support the proposed addition of the proposed Williams Fork Wilderness.

The Proposed Tenmile Recreation Management Area

Section 104 designates approximately 16,996 acres of the White River National Forest, as the Tenmile Recreation Management Area to conserve, protect and enhance recreational, scenic, watershed, habitat and ecological resources. The proposed Tenmile Recreation Management Area borders the Proposed Tenmile Wilderness area on three sides. This area is located immediately south of Frisco, Colorado, and straddles the Tenmile Mountain Range

The lands in the northern part of the Tenmile Recreation Management Area have historically been actively managed for a variety of uses, including timber harvest. This proposal would remove 3,479 acres from commercial timber harvest consideration. Otherwise, the designation is largely consistent with other current management of the area. The agency does not support this

section as written. We would like to work with the committee and bill sponsor to ensure that the area will remain available for commercial timber harvest and fuel reduction activities.

The Proposed Porcupine Gulch Wildlife Conservation Area

Section 105 designates approximately 8,176 acres of the White River National Forest as the Porcupine Gulch Wildlife Conservation Area, specifically to conserve, protect and enhance wildlife habitat and migration corridors primarily for lynx.

The proposed conservation area is located three miles east of Dillon, Colorado, extending to the Continental Divide. The proposed designation is consistent with the Forest wildlife landscape linkage, non-motorized backcountry recreation and special interest area designations in the 2002 Forest Plan.

The Proposed Williams Fork Wildlife Conservation Area

Section 106 designates approximately 3,492 acres of the White River National Forest as the Williams Fork Wildlife Conservation Area, specifically to conserve, protect and enhance wildlife habitat and migration corridors.

The proposed Conservation Area is located 19 miles north of Silverthorne, Colorado, on the lower flank of Williams Peak. The proposed designation is consistent with the wildlife management emphasis in the 2002 Forest Plan. The use of bicycles would continue to be allowed on designated trails and roadways.

The Proposed Camp Hale National Historic Landscape

Section 107 designates approximately 28, 728 acres of the White River National Forest as the Camp Hale National Historic Landscape, to preserve and interpret historic events, structure and artifacts while also providing increased recreational opportunities.

This area is located 10 miles south of Vail, Colorado, in the Eagle River Valley.

Camp Hale has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since April 1992 and is currently under evaluation by the National Park Service for a National Historic District designation.

If designated, Camp Hale would become the nation's first National Historic Landscape. The Act directs the Secretary to prepare a management plan within five years of enactment to enhance recreational activities, conserve historic values, create trails and road systems, improve watershed conditions and remove unexploded ordinance. Per Section 107, the Forest is required to coordinate with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Safety, the National Forest Foundation, the Colorado State Historic Preservation Office, the Camp Hale-Eagle River Headwaters Collaborative Group, and other units of government and organizations to develop and implement this plan.

The proposed designation is generally consistent with current Forest Plan management direction. The suitable timber base in the Camp Hale designation area is not planned for harvest in the foreseeable future because of the potential for unexploded ordinances. We would like to work

with the committee and bill sponsor to clarify that commercial timber harvesting and fuels treatments will be allowed in the designated area where these activities can occur safely.

White River National Forest Boundary Modification

Section 108 modifies the White River National Forest boundary by approximately 120 acres, and the Arapaho National Forest by 92.95 acres. The Forest Service does not object to this boundary adjustment to the National Forest System.

Arapaho National Forest Boundary Adjustment

Section 110 adjusts the boundary of the Arapaho National Forest to incorporate approximately 93 acres following written permission from the owners of the lots within the adjusted boundaries. Similar provisions were adopted in the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management and Recreation Act (S. 47) signed by the President on March 12, 2019.

Bolts Ditch Access and Use

Section 111 requires the Secretary to permit by special use authorization nonmotorized access and use of the Bolts Ditch headgate and the Bolts Ditch within the Holy Cross Wilderness for the purposes of water diversion and use, maintenance and repair of the ditch. Similar provisions were adopted as part of Public Law 116-9.

TITLE II—SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS

Section 203 would designate several parcels of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests totaling approximately 22,841 acres as Wilderness under the National Wilderness Preservation System. These parcels would be additions to the existing Lizard Head and Mount Sneffels Wilderness areas.

Section 204 would also designate the Sheep Mountain and Liberty Bell East areas as Special Management Areas to be managed to maintain or improve the area's existing Wilderness character for potential inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Additionally, Section 206(g) would permanently withdraw these designated lands as well as 6,590 acres of National Forest System lands in Naturita Canyon on the Uncompahgre National Forest from entry, appropriation, or disposal under the public land laws; location, entry, and patent under the mining laws; and operation under the mineral leasing and geothermal leasing laws.

USDA defers to the Department of the Interior regarding the proposal in section 203 to designate approximately 8,884 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands as the McKenna Peak Wilderness and the release of the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness Study Area in section 205.

The Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests are currently revising their Forest Plan. During the plan revision process, the Forest is working with the public to identify lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System and determine whether to recommend any areas for Wilderness designation. The Forest initiated its Wilderness review process in January 2018. The draft Wilderness evaluation report and

supporting materials were published on August 6, 2018. The draft environmental impact statement is scheduled to be released in the fall of 2019 with a draft decision on the Forest Plan, including analysis of areas for potential recommendations for Wilderness designation. A final decision will be made after the resolution of objections and is expected in winter of 2020.

Due to this ongoing public process, USDA believes a formal position on Wilderness designations would be premature at this time. Specific considerations regarding the current management situation for the Wilderness additions and special management areas are as follows.

Lizard Head Wilderness Additions

The Lizard Head Wilderness lies astride the San Miguel Mountains, 10 miles southwest of Telluride on the Uncompahgre and San Juan National Forests. The proposed Wilderness additions include five parcels, encompassing approximately 3,141 acres of National Forest System lands adjacent to the existing Wilderness. The Forest Plan, completed in 1983, does not recommend any of the areas for Wilderness designation. However, Wilderness designation would not be inconsistent with the current management of the area. No summer motorized recreation is currently allowed and effects to winter motorized recreation would be minimal as there is little snowmobile use of the area.

Mount Sneffels Wilderness Additions

The Mount Sneffels Wilderness comprises more than 16,500 acres on the Uncompahgre National Forest between the communities of Telluride and Ouray. The proposed Wilderness additions include four parcels that encompass approximately 19,700 acres of National Forest System lands adjacent to the existing Wilderness. As with the Lizard Head Additions, the Forest Plan does not recommend any of the areas for Wilderness designation. However, the designation is generally aligned with Forest Plan direction.

Liberty Bell East Special Management Area

Section 204 would designate 792 acres of National Forest System lands located north of the town of Telluride as a special management area on the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests.

We would like to work with the sponsor and the subcommittee to address some technical aspects of the bill regarding language to maintain the suitability of the area for potential inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System while still providing for uses such as helicopter access for recreation and the use of bicycles, in the special management area.

Sheep Mountain Special Management Area

Section 204 also would designate 21,663 acres of National Forest System lands located south of the town of Ophir as a special management area. About 10,930 acres are within the Uncompahgre National Forest and 10,733 acres are within the San Juan National Forest. This area contains some lands purchased recently with funds provided by Congress as part of the Ophir Valley Land and Water Conservation Fund project. Currently the Forest Plan identifies

half of the area to be managed for semi-primitive non-motorized recreation and the other half for other recreation purposes.

Naturita Canyon Mineral Withdrawal

National Forest System lands that would be withdrawn are within Naturita Canyon on the Uncompahgre National Forest, about five miles south of the community of Norwood. Naturita Canyon is relatively low-elevation river drainage (7,000 feet elevation) with steep canyon walls 1,000 feet in height.

USDA supports domestic energy and mineral production, including critical minerals, as important uses of the NFS. Presidential Executive Orders (EO) 13817, A Federal Strategy to Ensure Secure and Reliable Supplies of Critical Minerals, issued on December 20, 2017 and EO 13783, Promoting Energy Independence and Economic Growth, issued on March 28, 2017 reinvigorate USDA's responsibility to provide access and remove barriers to energy and locatable mineral development, including critical mineral commodities.

USDA's Forest Service stands ready to provide environmental, social, and economic analysis as Congress weighs the important considerations and consequences of permanent withdrawal.

TITLE III—Thompson Divide

Section 303 withdraws approximately 187,00 acres found on the Gunnison National Forest from operation of the public land, mining, mineral leasing, mineral materials, and geothermal leasing laws, subject to valid existing rights. The Forest currently operates grazing permits, outfitter and guide permits, and mineral leases in the area consistent with the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison NFs Forest Plan.

USDA supports domestic energy and mineral production as an important use of National Forest System Lands. We oppose the proposed withdrawal as it would have adverse effects on current lease holders and would not be consistent with the current Forest plan. In addition, the Forest is working with the public to identify lands that may be open to oil, gas and coal development as part of the Forest plan revision process. Due to this ongoing public process, USDA does not support a withdrawal at this time. USDA defers to the Department of Interior (DOI) for their views on the bill as it affects the public lands under their jurisdiction.

TITLE IV—Curecanti National Recreation Area

Section 402 establishes the Curecanti National Recreation Area consisting of approximately 50,667 acres in Colorado. Further, this section allows the DOI to enter into management agreements, or modify existing agreements, relating to the authorities of several DOI bureaus as well as the Forest Service to manage Federal land within the National Recreation Area (NRA). Section 403 transfers the jurisdiction of approximately 2,560 acres of the Gunnison National Forest to the National Park Service as part of the NRA.

The National Forest System (NFS) lands proposed for transfer are currently managed under the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests Forest Plan. Current activities in these areas include timber harvesting, grazing and recreation. Although there are no current timber sales, the area is a part of the suitable timber base. In addition, currently there are ongoing mechanical treatments for fuels treatments to increase forage production consistent with winter range objectives in portions of the proposed area.

In 2017, the Forest Service entered into an Interagency Agreement with the Curecanti National Recreation Area (NRA) to manage 710 acres of National Forest Systems (NFS) land. These two parcels were withdrawn from public entry when the Bureau of Reclamation created the NRA in 1958. Since 1966, the National Park Service has managed these acres under an interagency agreement awaiting further boundary adjustments. The Interagency Agreement was established for appropriate management of NFS lands incorporated within the current NRA boundaries.

The Forest Service has an interest in resolving the two parcels which were removed from public access during the creation of the NRA. However, the additional acres to the north of West Elk Creek and Soap Creek currently allow for active management, including timber harvest and fuels reduction activities, under the existing Forest plan. The Forest Service supports continued effort to establish the NRA boundary by incorporating the historical 710 acres of inholdings, consistent with current management practices, but does not support the additional transfer of NFS land.

This concludes my prepared statement.