

**Statement of Michelle Metteer  
City Administrator  
City of Ouray, Colorado**

**House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Federal Lands  
Hearing on**

**H.R. 5911, *Crystal Reservoir Conveyance Act***

**February 10, 2026**

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 5911, the Crystal Reservoir Conveyance Act. This bill directs the Secretary of Agriculture to convey approximately 45 acres of land underlying and surrounding Crystal Reservoir to the City of Ouray, Colorado.

H.R. 5911 is designed to provide multiple public benefits, including perpetual easements that protect year-round public access to fishing, trailheads, and trails, which are popular for year-round recreation in the Ouray Ranger District of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forests.

The City of Ouray would like to thank Representative Hurd for his leadership in sponsoring H.R. 5911 and introducing it during a government shutdown, given the urgency of enabling the City of Ouray to take ownership, repair the Full Moon Dam, and refill the reservoir. Restoring this essential water source will restore a wildfire-response asset and a beloved recreation destination, while guaranteeing the American people and our visitors permanent, free public access for recreation, fishing, and trails.

**Background**

Ouray is a home-rule municipality with a population of 912 across 512 acres. Ouray is the county seat of Ouray County, which has an estimated population of 5,221 and is approximately 46 percent federal public land, with about 38 percent of the County managed by the Ouray Ranger District of the GMUG.<sup>1</sup>

Ouray is a close-knit, volunteer-driven mountain community known for its friendly people, strong sense of pride, and deep connection to nature, culture, and history. Ouray's elevation is 7,800 feet and lies within a dramatic alpine bowl surrounded by towering serrated peaks cut by rivers, canyons, and waterfalls. Our city offers immediate access to world-class outdoor recreation year-round. We are often called a "City within a Park," and "Switzerland-of-America." Ouray is defined by our hot springs, extensive parks and trails, and

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<sup>1</sup> *We acknowledge that the land where we gather, work, and recreate in Ouray and Ouray County is the traditional and ancestral territory of the Ute people. Ute means "People of the Mountain." We honor the enduring relationship between the Ute Nations—including the Southern Ute, Ute Mountain Ute, and Uintah and Ouray Ute—and this land, which was taken through forced removal. We recognize their stewardship of this region, past and present, and pledge to honor their history and culture.*

iconic recreation areas like Box Cañon Park and the Ouray Ice Park. We have a rich history as a mining supply hub and a well-preserved national historic district that encompasses 28 percent of our compact city. We are fortunate to have a high-achieving school district and a vibrant yet laid-back small-town atmosphere. Ouray is a unique, sustainable mountain town that balances tourism with authentic community life and recreation with conservation.

Colorado's public lands are a significant contributor to the state's economy, and Ouray, like many Colorado communities, depends on healthy public lands and watersheds to sustain our livelihoods and public safety.

It is common in Colorado for a City the size of Ouray to own and maintain a reservoir the size of Crystal Reservoir. The Dam Safety Branch oversees hundreds of similar reservoirs owned and operated by small towns throughout Colorado.

### **History of Crystal Reservoir at Ironton Park, Ouray County**

Crystal Reservoir has been a cherished water and cultural resource in Ouray County for over 90 years. The site originally existed as a small natural alpine lake in Ironton Park, nestled at about 9,600 feet in elevation on the western side of U.S. Highway 550 near Red Mountain Pass. Early photos, including one by famed photographer William Henry Jackson in 1901, document its long-standing scenic presence in local heritage.

In the early 20th century, the lake's size was increased when the earthen Full Moon Dam was built (initially in the 1930s), creating what became known locally as Crystal Reservoir — a modest man-made water body about 8 feet deep at its center. It served as community water storage, wildlife habitat, and public recreation for generations.

In 2003, 800 acres of Ironton Park including Crystal Reservoir was protected through acquisition and transferred to the U.S. Forest Service via the Red Mountain Project, chaired by Ouray local Bob Risch<sup>2</sup> and related conservation partners.

There is precedent in the San Juan Mountains for conveyance of a small reservoir for public benefit.<sup>3</sup> *"It should be noted that in 1925, a [Congressional] Conveyance Act was used to transfer Molas Lake from the U.S. Government to the Town of Silverton, an equally spectacular and valuable water storage lake on the San Juan Skyway,"* states Red Mountain Task Force and Fort Lewis College Center of SW Studies, Office of Community Services: Ken Francis, Retired.<sup>4</sup>

### **Brief description of the Full Moon Dam and Crystal Reservoir**

Full Moon Dam, listed in the National Inventory of Dams (NID) as "Full Moon Dam (aka Crystal)" (Federal ID CO00306), is an earthen embankment dam located in Ironton Park, Ouray County, Colorado, within the Gunnison National Forest. Constructed in the early 20th century,

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<sup>2</sup> Tisdell Wright. (2018). The Mine Next Door; Celebrating 25 Years of Reclamation and Partnership at the Idarado Mine.

<sup>3</sup> An Act Granting Public Lands to the Town of Silverton, Colorado, For Public Park Purposes. Act of Congress of February 25, 1925 (43 Stat. 980). [https://molalake.com/DOCS\\_2024/Hoover52129.pdf](https://molalake.com/DOCS_2024/Hoover52129.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ken Francis, Retired (2025). Red Mountain Task Force and Fort Lewis College Center of SW Studies, Office of Community Services. <https://savecrystallake.org/#55fdbea4-1716-4944-a81e-99c1945b57a1> and [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IT03W-oi1aN41k29OB3dZIJj-xp984wR/view?usp=drive\\_link%5d](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IT03W-oi1aN41k29OB3dZIJj-xp984wR/view?usp=drive_link%5d)

the dam impounds Crystal Reservoir, a small but historically significant surface water storage facility with an approximate capacity of 80 acre-feet, but more consistently held at a normal storage of 31 acre-feet.<sup>5</sup> The dam was recently re-classified, although not yet updated in the NID, as having significant hazard potential with no loss of life, a designation based on the potential downstream consequences of failure rather than the presence of an active structural failure. Crystal Reservoir has long served multiple public purposes, including municipal water supply augmentation, drought resilience, emergency response support, recreation, and wildlife habitat.

Recent inspections conducted by the U.S. Forest Service identified structural concerns at Full Moon Dam, including seepage and embankment stability issues. In response, the Forest Service initiated a drawdown of Crystal Reservoir in 2024 to reduce hydraulic pressure on the dam. NEPA-related documents and agency communications describe the drawdown as a risk-reduction action pending further analysis of long-term management alternatives, including repair, modification, or transfer of ownership. The removal of stored water has eliminated the reservoir's historic water storage and public benefits, prompting local concern regarding water security, fire protection, environmental impacts, and economic loss.

Upon conveyance, the City of Ouray will work with the Colorado Dam Safety Branch to inspect the safety of the dam, and to scope, monitor and perform any necessary repairs. The City has put together a team of Civil and Geotechnical Engineers to work on the Dam facility. The City's engineering consultants have already had numerous discussions with the Colorado Dam Safety Branch. Given the small size of the dam and reservoir and the improvements already made to the dam by the United States Bureau of Reclamation in 2012, additional foreseeable actions and repairs are likely to include but are not limited to: implementation of a monitoring program, the installation and monitoring of toe drains, and improvements to the spillway. The City of Ouray is prepared, committed, and able to perform the repairs and assume the responsibility for ongoing maintenance and operation costs.

### **H.R. 5911, The Crystal Reservoir Conveyance Act will**

1. ***Restore Local Control.*** H.R. 5911 puts control back into the hands of the people who depend on the reservoir most and care about the land and history of Ironton Park and Red Mountain Mining District.
2. ***Repair and refill Crystal Reservoir while relieving the U.S. Forest Service from the burdens of operation costs, maintenance costs, and liability.*** While H.R. 5911 allows for the conveyance to occur at no cost to the city, in exchange, the city assumes all future costs and liability for repairing the Full Moon Dam and refilling the reservoir, within the original footprint of the lake. A Congressionally Directed Conveyance is the most efficient and effective way to swiftly restore Crystal Lake's beauty and function. The City will work with the State of Colorado, the Division of Water Resources, the Department of Natural Resources, the Design and Dam Safety Engineer, and the City's Public Works, engineering, and legal teams to implement the repairs at its own expense. The City will take responsibility for all future operations and maintenance of Crystal Reservoir, Full Moon Dam, and associated infrastructure, at its own cost.

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<sup>5</sup> National Inventory of Dams. (2026). Full Moon AKA Crystal.  
<https://nid.sec.usace.army.mil/nid/#/dams/system/CO00306/structure>

3. ***Restore drought resistance and water security that was lost when Crystal Reservoir was drained.*** The Colorado Water Plan emphasizes multipurpose water storage, watershed health, and proactive local water management. Ownership of Crystal Reservoir will enable the City of Ouray to enhance water security for its residents, improve drought resilience, and implement conservation strategies consistent with the Plan's objectives.

The City of Ouray currently has decreed water rights for the exchange and storage of water in Crystal Reservoir. Crystal Reservoir must be filled in order to utilize these water rights addressed in its augmentation plan. The City needs this augmentation water from Crystal Reservoir to legally and reliably operate its municipal water system under Colorado water law, particularly during low-flow conditions. Ouray's senior and junior water rights are subject to administration on the Uncompahgre River system, meaning that when natural streamflows drop—especially in late summer, drought years, or during peak tourism demand—the City must replace or “augment” depletions caused by municipal diversions. Crystal Reservoir historically provided that replacement water, allowing Ouray to meet its legal obligations to downstream water users while continuing to supply residents, visitors, and essential public services.

Without access to augmentation water from Crystal Reservoir, the City faces curtailment risk during periods when water demand is highest and natural supplies are lowest. This affects not only residential use, but also fire protection, emergency response, sanitation, local businesses, and the City's hot springs and tourism economy, which are foundational to Ouray's fiscal stability. Augmentation storage is particularly critical because Ouray lacks large alternative storage facilities and is geographically constrained in its ability to develop new ones.

4. ***Repair a critical public safety and wildfire response asset where it is most needed:*** With increasing threats of wildfire in the San Juan Mountains, the reservoir serves a critical role in regional wildfire mitigation. Local control will allow the City to integrate the reservoir into comprehensive wildfire response and forest health strategies, improving emergency preparedness and watershed resilience. Ouray County Sheriff, Justin Perry, has expressed the need for this critical resource as follows “*Crystal is a crucial water source for fast, effective fire suppression...To ensure we're prepared for future emergencies, it's imperative that we refill this reservoir and make it a key asset in our wildfire response strategy.*”<sup>6</sup>
5. ***Provide permanent protections for free and full public access to the reservoir and adjacent GMUG National Forest lands managed by the Ouray Ranger District of the U.S. Forest Service.*** H.R. 5911 includes strict requirements to keep the land as undeveloped public open space with free access for fishing and trails in perpetuity. H.R. 5911 guarantees permanent public access easements for all trails and routes and full public access for all recreational activities within or around the 45-acre conveyance parcel. It guarantees that the conveyed land can be used only as undeveloped public open space, free of charge for all recreational activities, in perpetuity.

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<sup>6</sup> Justin Perry, Ouray County Sheriff (2025). Save Crystal Lake. <https://savecrystallake.org/#55fdbea4-1716-4944-a81e-99c1945b57a1> and [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IT03W-oi1aN41k29OB3dZl1j-xp984wR/view?usp=drive\\_link%5d](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IT03W-oi1aN41k29OB3dZl1j-xp984wR/view?usp=drive_link%5d)

6. ***Protect fragile fen and wetland ecosystems.*** Upstream wetlands will be protected from impairment or harm from the operation of the reservoir.
7. ***Safeguard all valid existing rights while prohibiting future development and related conflicts.*** The City of Ouray will return Crystal Reservoir and Full Moon Dam to the status quo conditions and uses enjoyed for the last 90 years.
8. ***Satisfy broad and strong local support for the conveyance, repair, and restoration.*** We have broad support from the Red Mountain Project proponents that purchased Crystal Reservoir from a willing private mining company two decades ago, to local entities, including the City of Ouray, Ouray County Sheriff, Colorado River District, several neighboring municipalities, watershed, trail, and historical organizations. Statements and letters of support are compiled<sup>7</sup> with over 450 people having signed an online petition<sup>8</sup> to save Crystal Reservoir.

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<sup>7</sup> Twenty four statements and letters of support (2025) compiled by the City of Ouray and Ouray County.  
[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IT03W-oi1aN41k29OB3dZ11j-xp984wR/view?usp=drive\\_link%5d](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IT03W-oi1aN41k29OB3dZ11j-xp984wR/view?usp=drive_link%5d)

<sup>8</sup> Petition to Save Crystal Reservoir (aka Crystal Lake). Live online petition (2025-2026).  
<https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/save-crystal-reservoir>

**Crystal Reservoir in the fall of 2022, prior to being drained. Camera view from Full Moon Dam, facing south.<sup>1</sup>**



**Crystal Reservoir in the fall of 2025, after being drained. Aerial view using a drone, facing south.<sup>2</sup>**



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<sup>1</sup> Photo Credit: Elliot McGucken's 45Epic Fine Art Landscape Photography. <https://www.mcgucken.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Photo Credit: Mike Boruta - Ouraybyflight.com. The photo most recently appeared in an OurayNews article on November 4, 2025. <https://www.ouraynews.com/2025/11/04/hurd-introduces-house-bill-transfer-crystal-reservoir-ouray/>