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Colorado joins national “Great Outdoors Week” push as Congress threatens rollbacks

DeGette joins Governors, business & outdoor leaders across the country calling for national forest protection

DENVER, CO (August 22, 2011) – Representative Diana DeGette is joining governors and other leaders across the country in support of Great Outdoors Week, August 20-28. The second annual national celebration of public lands and recreation comes as Congress is considering legislation that would open up more than 60 million acres of public lands to new industrial development. Conservation, recreation, sportsmen, and business groups -including Wilderness Workshop, Colorado Mountain Club, Trout Unlimited and others- will host more than 50 hiking, fishing and climbing trips in national forests across the state to raise public awareness about the need to protect public lands.

“Here in Colorado, while my constituents and I are working with the Forest Service to keep the best of our backcountry forests protected, some in Congress are pushing on behalf of special interests to take those protections away entirely,” said DeGette. “Coloradans depend on these areas for our drinking water, our outdoor economy and our cherished way of life, and they must be preserved.” DeGette issued a statement today in support of Great Outdoors Week.

In July, the House Natural Resources Committee held a hearing on H.R. 1581, introduced by House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy of California, which would take away protections for national forest lands and Wilderness Study Areas, opening up an area the size of Wyoming to large-scale development. The House could vote on the bill this fall. Wyoming’s Sen. John Barrasso has introduced a companion bill, S. 1087. The measure is only one of multiple attempts by lawmakers in Washington, DC to undo fundamental environmental protections for clean air, clean water, endangered species and public lands.

“The bill is a double threat to Colorado’s national forest roadless areas,” explains Elise Jones, Executive Director of the Colorado Environmental Coalition. “Not only would it end existing protections provided to these treasured landscapes, it would also bar future action to safeguard them under either the Roadless Area Conservation Rule or the current state-based rulemaking underway by the Obama administration.”
Colorado conservation, sportsmen’s and outdoor industry groups have been critical of the administration’s new roadless proposal, saying that it gives meaningful protection to only 13 percent of the state’s 4.4 million acres of undeveloped national forests, according to a report issued last month. As a result, roadless areas across the state – including Pikes Peak, Hermosa Creek, Currant Creek, Cochetopa Hills, Pagoda Peak, Bristol Head, Kannah Creek, Thompson Creek, Turkey Creek and Tanner Peak – would be vulnerable to new road-building, coal mining and oil and gas development.

Each year, roadless areas in Colorado provide the equivalent of approximately 250 percent of Denver’s annual water use, according to a recent report published in the Journal of Soil and Water Conservation. National forests are a source of drinking water for about 124 million Americans.

Charlie Berger, owner of Denver Beer Co., joined in calling for strong protections. “A quarter of Colorado’s headwaters originate in roadless areas. Colorado mountain water is not only good to drink; it’s good for business. Beer is 95% water and I cannot maintain a high quality product without the availability of high quality water.”

Colorado national forest roadless areas and other public lands also make a significant contribution to the state’s economy. According to the Outdoor Industry Association, outdoor recreation contributes over $10 billion annually to the state’s economy and supports 107,000 jobs in Colorado.

“People can have fun and show their support for saving these treasured places,” said Craig Mackey, Director of Government Affairs at the Outdoor Industry Association. "Our public lands in places like Pikes Peak or Hermosa Creek, provide some of the best outdoor recreation areas we have in the state, and Coloradans are enjoying their public lands even more today than they did ten or twenty years ago.”

Interested individuals can go to www.coloradodeservesmore.org to find out about the week’s activities in their area, and to learn how to support roadless area protection.

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