

Statement for the Record
Bureau of Land Management
Department of the Interior
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks
S. 1794, Browns Canyon National Monument and Wilderness Act
July 23, 2014

Thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior to testify on S. 1794, the Browns Canyon National Monument and Wilderness Act. The Department supports S. 1794 as it applies to lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and defers to the Department of Agriculture regarding lands within the National Forest System Lands.

Background

Browns Canyon is characterized by its rugged beauty, colorful outcroppings and the abundant wildlife of the Arkansas River Valley. The west side of the proposed national monument features Browns Canyon which descends 3,000 feet to the Arkansas River. From the river, the land climbs dramatically to an elevation of 10,000 feet. A significant herd of bighorn sheep resides within Browns Canyon and it is an important winter range for deer and elk. Hunters and hikers alike take in the spectacular vistas across the Arkansas Valley to the 14,000 foot peaks of the Collegiate Range, while the gulches and canyons offer exceptional opportunities for solitude.

The Arkansas River is one of the nation's most popular whitewater rafting destinations, with more than 300,000 visitors floating it annually. Nearly half of these visitors float the nationally-renowned Browns Canyon segment. In addition to whitewater rafting, visitors enjoy fishing, hunting, hiking, backpacking, camping, horseback riding, snowshoeing and photography in the area.

For over a decade, bipartisan proposals have been proposed to protect Browns Canyon. Local elected officials, sportsmen's groups and business owners have endorsed Senator Udall's current proposal to permanently protect this dramatic landscape.

S. 1794

S. 1794 proposes to designate nearly 22,000 acres of Federal land in Chaffee County, Colorado, as the Browns Canyon National Monument. The bill further proposes to designate over 10,000 acres of the national monument as wilderness. Approximately 9,750 acres of the proposed monument and 7,960 acres of the proposed wilderness are lands currently managed by the BLM, and approximately 12,060 acres of the proposed monument and 2,500 acres of the proposed wilderness are lands currently managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Each agency would continue to manage these areas following designation.

Each of the national monuments and National Conservation Areas (NCAs) designated by Congress to be managed by the BLM is unique. However, these designations typically have critical elements in common, including: withdrawal from the public land, mining, and mineral leasing laws; limiting off-highway vehicles to roads and trails designated for their use; and language that charges the Secretary of the Interior with allowing only those uses that further the

conservation purposes for which the unit is established. Furthermore, these Congressional designations should not diminish the protections that currently apply to the lands. This bill honors these principles, and we support the monument's designation as it applies to lands managed by the BLM.

The core of the proposed national monument would be designated as the Browns Canyon Wilderness. This area meets the definition of wilderness; the land and its community of life are largely untrammelled. It has retained its primeval character and has been influenced primarily by the forces of nature, with outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation or solitude.

Under the bill, most of the existing Wilderness Study Area (WSA) will be incorporated into the Browns Canyon Wilderness. Approximately 120 acres of land within the WSA will not be designated as wilderness and would be released from WSA status. These released acres along the Arkansas River will be managed as part of the monument, but release from WSA status will provide more flexibility in the area contiguous to the river.

We would like the opportunity to work with the sponsor on an updated map prior to markup of the legislation.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of S. 1794, we look forward to its swift passage.