

Testimony of Scott Jones regarding Hermosa Watershed Protection Act(HR 1839)

House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Natural Resources and Environmental Regulation

March 6, 2014

Good Morning Chairman Bishop and Mr. Grijalva and subcommittee members. My name is Scott Jones and I am here on behalf of the motorized user groups in Colorado including the Trail Preservation Alliance, Off Road Business Association, Colorado Snowmobile Association and Colorado Off Highway Vehicle Coalition. I would like to thank you for this opportunity to testify in favor of the Hermosa Watershed Protection Act. The motorized community supports this Legislation, as we believe the legislation represents a significant step towards protecting multiple use recreation and highly valued natural resources in the proposal areas. For the motorized community there are two major components of the legislation we support, which are the release of the Wilderness Study area and designation of the special management area for the protection of motorized recreation. The motorized community does agree that the area to be designated Wilderness has generally not seen a high level of motorized recreation and the area is suitable for designation.

The Hermosa Watershed Protection Act releases a Wilderness Study Area ("WSA") straddling the Molas Pass area between Silverton and Durango Colorado that has been repeatedly analyzed and found unsuitable for designation as Wilderness. These analysis recognized the long history of motorized usage of the area, proximity of the area to major roadways and the difficulty in enforcing any winter boundary for the WSA with adjacent local government properties. The WSA area to be released is comparatively small but highly valued by the winter motorized community as the area has a long history of groomed routes providing public access for winter recreation, has an active rental operation using the area and provides a comparatively flat easy riding experience that allows families to use the area for winter recreation. The wide range of winter recreation that occurs in the Molas Pass area to be released is a significant economic driver for local communities in the winter time.

The WSA area to be released is currently to be closed in the recently released BLM Resource Management Plan, making this legislation very important to the winter users. For reasons that remain unclear, the current management of the area is identified as closed to motorized usage despite the ongoing motorized usage of the area under the 1983 version of the RMP. BLM management asserts that closure is required under the new WSA management guidelines released by the BLM, despite the fact that these management guidelines have several pages of management guidelines for motorized usage of WSA areas.

Our discussions regarding recreational usage of the WSA area started with issues involving the renewal of permits for groomed routes in the area but quickly progressed to the closure of the entire area in the near future. Our users have met with BLM representatives regarding this closure and have undertaken significant review of the history of the management of the area. The Molas Pass area was originally inventoried by BLM as a result of § 603 of FLPMA but has been managed for multiple usage since the inventory and our research was able to locate the original BLM inventory of the Molas Pass area that specifically identified motorized usage of the area at the time the area was inventoried pursuant to §603

of FLPMA. None of the research we have conducted supports closure of the area, and our user groups were able to locate the original BLM inventory of the area that was performed pursuant to the §603 inventory, which noted motorized usage at the time of the inventory. The Molas Pass recreational area is a small portion of the area that was originally inventoried and a large portion of original inventory area has already been designated as Wilderness. Many thought the small portion of the remaining area had been released with prior legislative action.

In addition to the research conducted by the motorized community, the San Juan County commissioners held a public meeting regarding last year to address concerns about closure of the Molas Pass area to motorized usage. Several BLM and Forest Service employees were in attendance at the meeting including the field office manager. Everyone that attended the meeting was in favor of continued multiple usage of the area including the Wilderness Society and San Juan Citizens Alliance. For reasons that remain unclear, the input from this meeting was not addressed or even acknowledged in the subsequent release of the BLM 2013 resource management plan. The identification of the Molas Pass area as currently closed to motorized usage in the Resource Management Plan has been highly frustrating to the motorized community given the resources and partnership efforts that have been undertaken to address usage of the area and the recognition that current management is not accurately reflected in the RMP. Many in our community feel they have done everything they possibly could to address this issue and these efforts simply have not been addressed.

In addition to the release of the WSA, the Hermosa Watershed Protection Act creates a special management area of approximately 70,000 acres for the protection and preservation of both summer and winter motorized usage of the area. This is an area where motorized usage was again in question under the RMP that was released, despite a long history of motorized recreation in the special management area. Several alternatives sought the complete closure of this area to all motorized usage. The Special management area has an extensive single track motorized trail network that is highly valued by local users and is specifically identified for protection in the SMA. Protection of the 70,000 acre SMA is a major reason that several of our local representatives participated in the working group process that was the basis for this legislation. Statutory preservation of the trail network in the special management areas has become even more important after the release of the final RMP, which has proposed an 83% increase in the areas designated as unsuitable for motorized recreational usage despite the growing population in the planning area and strong demand for multiple use recreational opportunities.

We further believe the Hermosa Watershed Protection Act would be a significant step towards repairing the relationships between the federal land managers, local clubs and users of these public lands. This relationship has become strained over recent years, as in addition to the recently released RMP for both the Forest Service and BLM offices, federal planning has included a travel management plan that was not supported by the motorized community despite significant involvement in that process and the issues with the management of Molas Pass area. The local users have also been highly frustrated with decisions to separate management of the two land management agencies and move away from the Service First management that has governed the planning area for a long time.

While our local clubs and users have been very supportive of managers, both with volunteer hours to assist with resources and supporting of grants to the CPW OHV grant program. Grants from the CPW OHV grant fund, which is funded by user registration fees and moneys from the recreational trails program, have been estimated to be several million dollars in the planning area over the last several years. These clubs frequently feel that the concerns that they are raising in these planning actions are simply not listened too. This has become highly frustrating for the users and clubs, but is an issue that is certainly not isolated to the San Juan and Tres Rios planning areas.

I would like to thank the Chairman, Ranking Member and members of the subcommittee for providing this opportunity to discuss the motorized community support for the Hermosa Watershed Protection Act and would welcome any questions you may have.