

Statement of Leslie Weldon
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U.S. Forest Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Before the United States Senate
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests and Mining
November 20, 2013
Concerning
S.776
Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Act

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to provide the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) views on S. 776, a bill to establish the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness in the State of New Mexico, to provide for the conveyance of certain parcels of National Forest System land in the State, and for other purposes.

USDA supports S. 776, if amended to make the provisions related to the conveyances of National Forest System lands consistent with the department's testimony.

S. 776 would designate the 45,000 acre Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. The bill would also make a boundary adjustment to the Wheeler Peak Wilderness Area. In addition, the bill would direct the conveyance of parcels of National Forest System land to the town of Red River and the village of Taos Ski Valley without consideration. These parcels contain sewage treatment plants, recreational facilities and private buildings that are authorized under special use permits. The bill also would authorize the conveyance of two parcels to

private parties, totaling approximately 0.3 acres of National Forest System lands, for fair market value.

Section 101-Designation of the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness

The Department supports the addition of the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area on the Carson National Forest as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. The 45,000 acre Columbine-Hondo area is located in the Carson National Forest and was designated as a Wilderness Study Area in 1980 and was recommended for Wilderness designation in the Forest Plan in 1986. This alpine area is part of the southern end of the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range and truly has outstandingly remarkable features including Gold Hill and Lobo Peak both rising above tree line over 12,000 feet. It is a scenic backdrop for skiers at Taos Ski Valley as well as the communities in Taos County. It is an area popular with summer hikers and fishermen because of its stunning views, steep canyons, clear cold streams and accessible trail system.

In the intervening years since the Forest Plan recommendation, two of the steeper trails within the proposed Wilderness Area have been used by highly skilled mountain bikers. Upon designation, these trails would no longer be available for mountain bike use.

Section 102-Wheeler Peak Wilderness Boundary Modification

In order to address the loss of mountain biking opportunities with the creation of the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness, mountain bike and wilderness interests have proposed adjusting the Wheeler Peak Wilderness boundary to allow for mountain bike use. The modification also adds acreage to the Wheeler Peak Wilderness for a net addition of 650 acres. While the Department applauds the collaborative efforts between interest groups, we would like to work with the Committee to explore other options to address mountain biking opportunities as this proposal may present unforeseen management challenges.

Section 201-Town of Red River Land Conveyance and Section 202-Village of Taos Ski Valley Land Conveyance

While the Department understands the interests of local communities in acquiring parcels which are considered vital to community infrastructure and development, the Department has concerns with the proposed conveyance of these parcels without consideration. As a matter of general precedent, the Department supports conveyances only where the Federal Government receives appropriate consideration. The Town of Red River and the Village of Taos Ski Valley plan to develop permanent infrastructure on the parcels proposed for conveyance. The Department recommends conveying the parcels for community purposes for market value and that the proceeds be deposited into the Sisk Act fund. Additionally, the legislation would provide for the reversion of the property to the United States, at the election of the Secretary, if the conditions under Sections 201(d) and 202(d) are violated. We would like to work with the Committee to address concerns with the reversionary language.

Section 203 – Authorization of Sale of Certain National Forest System Land

The Department supports the conveyance of NFS parcels for market value and the proceeds being deposited in a Sisk Act fund. The parcels to be conveyed to the private parties are each less than one acre in size.

This concludes my statement and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.