

**Statement for the Record
Bureau of Land Management
U.S. Department of the Interior**

**Senate Energy & Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks**

S. 594, Continental Divide Trail Completion Act

June 21, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S. 594, Continental Divide Trail Completion Act. S. 594 directs the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior to complete the 3,100-mile Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDNST) by November 10, 2028, – the 50th anniversary of the trail’s designation. The bill also establishes a joint U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Trail Completion Team to facilitate the voluntary acquisitions, rights-of-ways and conservation easements needed to complete the trail.

On January 27, 2021, President Biden signed Executive Order 14008, *Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*, which launched a government-wide effort to confront climate change and restore balance on public lands and waters. The President’s directive recognizes the opportunities America’s lands and waters offer and outlines a historic and ambitious challenge to the nation to conserve at least 30 percent of our lands and waters by 2030. The CDNST provides a place to reconnect with nature by offering high quality hiking, horseback-riding, and other recreational opportunities along the Continental Divide. The Department of the Interior (Department) supports S. 594 as it aligns with our priorities to provide safe and equitable access to outdoor recreation opportunities for all Americans. We believe the bill has the potential to address some long-standing challenges, and we look forward to working with the sponsors and the Committee on minor modifications. We defer to the Department of Agriculture regarding provisions affecting the management of lands administered by the Forest Service.

Background

In 1968, Congress established the National Trails System Act to create trails in both urban and rural settings for people of all ages, interests, skills, and physical abilities. Today, there are 30 congressionally designated National Scenic and Historic Trails, many within an hour's drive from most urban areas. The lands these trails traverse often have complex jurisdictions, which requires substantial partnering among Federal agencies, non-profit organizations, and dedicated volunteers.

In 1978, Congress added the CDNST to the National Trails System and identified a corridor straddling along the backbone of the North American continent – the Divide – for the future placement of the CDNST. The entire CDNST corridor is approximately 3,100 miles long, extending from the Canadian border in Montana to the border of Mexico in New Mexico. Today, the completed portions of the CDNST traverse approximately 2,100 miles of Forest Service-managed lands, 400 miles of BLM-managed lands, 260 miles of National Park Service-managed lands, 60 miles of State lands, and 2 miles of Tribal lands. The trail was designated for its scenic

significance and is considered the “King of Trails,” more difficult than its sister long distance trails, the Appalachian and Pacific Crest Trails. It navigates dramatically diverse ecosystems through mountain meadows, granite peaks, and high-desert surroundings.

S. 594

S. 594 requires the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to ensure the completion of the CDNST as a contiguous route, to the maximum extent possible, by November 10, 2028. To complete and optimize the trail, the bill establishes the Trail Completion Team composed of Forest Service and BLM employees. The Trail Completion Team is directed to carry out land and right-of-way acquisitions, easement acquisitions, relocations, and trail construction activities required for completion. Lastly, S. 594 requires the Secretary of Agriculture to submit a Comprehensive Development Plan to Congress that identifies and plans the elimination of trail gaps, and submit annual reports to Congress.

The Department supports the completion of the CDNST and has consistently worked towards this goal since its designation. Today, only 5 percent of the trail remains incomplete. The Department supports the creation of the Trail Completion Team to resolve long-standing barriers to completing the remainder of the trail. The Department notes that success of achieving the Sponsor’s intent to complete the CDNST, on or before the 50th anniversary of its designation, is dependent on strong community-led efforts to work with willing landowners to connect the lands through means such as of a rights-of-ways, access and conservation easements, and acquisition of land. The Department acknowledges the challenges in completing the final portion of the trail given the presence of private lands within the trail corridor and is committed to completing the trail to the maximum extent possible, as provided by the bill.

Finally, the Department defers to the Department of Agriculture on provisions of the bill related to the Comprehensive Development Plan and reporting requirements.

Conclusion

The Department supports S. 594, and we would welcome the opportunity to work with the sponsor and the Committee on minor modifications to the bill.