

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 10, 2026

The Honorable Doug Burgum
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Burgum,

We write to express our deep concern about the Interior Department's review of its wilderness management policies. Lands with wilderness characteristics, wilderness study areas, and designated wilderness areas protect millions of acres of intact habitat, watersheds, ecological and cultural resources, scenic and backcountry values. The intact nature of the entire wilderness system protects whole swaths of habitat and protects migration corridors that aid in the protection of endangered species from the Canada Lynx to the Red-Cockaded Woodpecker. The security from pollution protects millions of acres of headwaters and clean water that benefit communities across the country. Further, wilderness and future wilderness areas contribute to the vastness of the outdoor recreation economy, inviting visitors to enjoy the wildness of the areas. These areas are some of the best places to fish, hunt, hike, or backpack. They are unparalleled and protected for the sake of solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation and are beloved lands.

Since the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964, Congress has had the authority to designate wilderness areas to protect and conserve some of this country's wildest places. Congress also has the authority to decide not to designate certain areas as wilderness and release them for general use. The agencies under your jurisdiction can identify lands with wilderness characteristics; but each agency is required to manage these lands with the goal of protecting their wilderness characteristics. But regardless of how they are selected, the final decision about designation rests with Congress.

It is atypical for the Interior Department to conduct land management planning by asking for comments on its agencies' general operating procedures. And given this Administration's obsession with development and disposal of public lands, it seems clear that this comment period is really just a ploy to weaken protections for public lands. This sweeping review comes in addition to the Administration's efforts to strip protections from national monuments and cultural resource areas, sell vast amounts of public lands in the West, repeal Roadless Rule protections, and change how travel management is developed on public lands. Opening five different comment periods for three different agencies to solicit changes to a myriad of wilderness policies only creates confusion. Soliciting comments on how designated wilderness is managed by the Bureau of Land Management is not in line with the Wilderness Act or the Federal Land Policy and Management Act.

The management changes that you are seeking will threaten the wilderness character of these lands and may disqualify them for future designation by Congress. Not only does this undermine Congress' role in wilderness management, but it places nearly 200 million acres of public land at risk.

Lands with wilderness characteristics and parcels that qualify for future designation need to be properly stewarded until Congress decides their permanent status. Each of these areas have management plan that were developed with public input and comments specific to the landscape. Opening a general comment period does not compare to the qualified review, public engagement, and specificity that each unit of the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, or the Fish and Wildlife Service receives in land management planning.

Therefore, we write in opposition to any policy changes that place congressionally designated wilderness areas, wilderness study areas, lands with wilderness characteristics, or lands that agencies have identified as eligible or suitable for designation, at risk. Further, we respectfully request that your Department consider the 60-year history of wilderness management in this country before taking extreme actions that will jeopardize some of our most valued lands. These lands must be managed at the non-impairment standard so that they can remain untrammelled.

Sincerely,



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



Adam B. Schiff
United States Senator



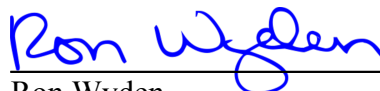
Alex Padilla
United States Senator



John Hickenlooper
United States Senator



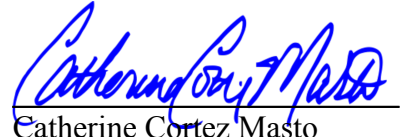
Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



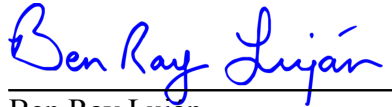
Ron Wyden
United States Senator

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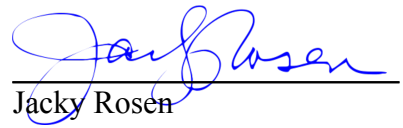
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

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Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Ben Ray Lujan", written over a horizontal line.

Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Jacky Rosen", written over a horizontal line.

Jacky Rosen
United States Senator