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## Velasco, Will back Thompson Divide withdrawal

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FILE - Former House District 57 incumbent Perry Will, the Republican candidate, debated Democrat Elizabeth Velasco at the Robinson Theater on the Colorado Mesa University campus in September 2022.

Scott Crabtree

Two state lawmakers from Garfield County, one a Democrat and the other a Republican, have jointly thrown their support behind a federal proposal to ban new federal oil and gas leasing and mining claims for 20 years on some 225,000 acres of federal land in western Colorado.

State Rep. Elizabeth Velasco, D-Glenwood Springs, and state Sen. Perry Will, R-New Castle, on Thursday released a joint letter supporting what's known as the Thompson Divide administrative withdrawal.

The proposal would apply to lands stretching from the Glenwood Springs area south to Crested Butte and east of Crawford. The lands are in Garfield, Pitkin and Gunnison counties.

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The Biden administration announced the proposed withdrawal last fall, amid continuing efforts by some Colorado Democrats in Congress to permanently protect the Thompson Divide area from future oil and gas leasing. The proposal now will undergo federal environmental review.

Velasco defeated Will last fall when he ran for reelection to his House seat, after his district was redrawn to join Democrat-heavy Pitkin County and part of Eagle County with Garfield County. Will later was named to replace Bob Rankin, who resigned as senator for the 5th Senate District.

Debate over oil and gas leasing in Thompson Divide has gone on for years. In 2015, a White River National Forest oil and gas plan closed to leasing about 61,000 acres of primarily Thompson Divide acreage for the life of the plan. The Bureau of Land Management in 2016 canceled 25 undeveloped oil and gas leases covering 33,000 acres in the Thompson Divide area after retroactive environmental review, reimbursing the lease owners for them.

Velasco and Will said in a letter to Colorado BLM Director Doug Vilsack and Forest Service Regional Forester Frank Beum, "For decades, no single issue has united local communities in and around the Thompson Divide more effectively than the campaign for permanent protection of the area from new mineral leasing and development. The issue has brought together people from different vocations, different walks of life, and different political philosophies.

"That broad-based support continues today, as reflected in the huge outpouring of public support BLM received in the recent comment period. Over 60,000 people took the time to send written comment to BLM articulating their support for the proposed administrative withdrawal of Thompson Divide. Supportive comments came from local residents, farmers and ranchers,

hunters and fishers, water users, recreationists, wildlife lovers, conservation groups, and thousands upon thousands of other folks from around the country who support protecting the Thompson Divide."

Velasco and Will also pointed to support from many local governments for the mineral withdrawal.

"Given the unprecedented local support among communities in our districts, this process needs to move quickly and remain a priority for the agencies. We write to ask that you do everything in your power to ensure agency officials have adequate resources to move ahead with and secure an administrative withdrawal for the Thompson Divide."

U.S. Rep. Lauren Boebert, R-Silt, and the Western Energy Alliance oil and gas group oppose locking away the acreage from possible energy development under new leases. Existing leases wouldn't be affected by the withdrawal.

Velasco said in a news release, "We must protect public lands as an important part of our way of life, and for the well-being of our future generations. I am proud to support the proposed Administrative Withdrawal, which has united the communities we represent like no other issue."

Will worked for 40 years for what is now Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and said in the release that in that career he came "to intimately know the landscape — and the wildlife — of the Thompson Divide. My fellow hunters and anglers want to see the Divide protected because it's home to abundant black bears, elk, and one of our state's last remaining genetically pure strains of cutthroat trout."

Michael Gorman, campaign manager of the Wilderness Workshop conservation group, said in the release, "More than ever, our community is Unified for Thompson Divide and we're grateful for Senator Will and Representative Velasco's bipartisan letter and support. Elected officials from both

parties understand just how important these public lands are and we look forward to making the proposed Thompson Divide Administrative Withdrawal a reality.”

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