



Doug Vilsack
Colorado State Director
Bureau of Land Management

1/12/23

Dear Director Vilsack,

The Mount Sopris Nordic Council fully supports our community's efforts to protect the Thompson Divide from the negative impacts of oil and gas development to our lands, waters, and air. For the record, we support the administrative withdrawal of the Thompson Divide from all future oil and gas leasing and development.

We are concerned about direct impacts to the landscape from roads, pipelines, and well pads. We are also concerned that the impact of these site-specific disturbances aren't restricted to those sites. Rather, their impacts degrade overall ecological health and habitat integrity of the larger Thompson Divide landscape that Spring Gulch is connected to. Most importantly for the values we're entrusted with wisely stewarding, increased extraction and use of fossil fuels accelerates climate change, an existential threat to cross country skiing at Spring Gulch. And it's not a future, conceptual concern. Already winters start later and end earlier, resulting in a shorter ski season forcing the Nordic Council to initiate an expensive climate resiliency and adaptation plan. The most direct impact is to areas that historically accumulated snow in early winter and held it late into spring but that are now snow free in the early and late winter. In the summer of 2022, we developed 6 km of new trails in areas that have better snow retention. In 2023, we will create a new parking area adjacent to the new trails so that skiers don't have to navigate several hundred yards of mud in early winter and in the last month of ski season.

For our shoestring-budget, all-volunteer nonprofit, these climate adaptations are a significant financial burden. Unfortunately, the best science predicts further warming trends with the current greenhouse

gas load in the atmosphere and more unavoidable financial burdens as we continue our climate resilience adaptations. While a seeming drop in the global climate bucket, developing oil and gas in the Thompson Divide would only make our problem incrementally worse.

The Mount Sopris Nordic Council has managed and administered the Spring Gulch Cross Country Skiing Trail System since 1987. Nestled in a relatively remote and quiet valley at the end of the plowed road a few miles west of Carbondale, CO, Spring Gulch has 21+ km of cross-country ski trails available at no cost to residents of and visitors to the Carbondale and greater Roaring Fork Valley community. Few signs of modernity exist. Juniper, Gambel oak and pinon dominate the hillsides while the wooden fences, cattle guards, and clearings are indicators that the area is still actively ranched. It is not uncommon to spot bald or golden eagles in the sky, deer, elk and more recently the occasional moose striding through the valley floor and the forests surrounding Spring Gulch. These features give visitors the opportunity to experience a taste of the unspoiled “old west” while enjoying world-class cross-country skiing. A tour through of the trail system offer the Nordic skier of any level a sense of place and history while experiencing exciting skiing and timeless, stunning views.

Our trail counters show that Spring gulch hosts 200-300 skiers on weekdays and as many as 400-600 on weekend days. Local schools regularly bring their kids up to learn how to XC ski and to instill healthy lifestyles in them. The Aspen Valley Ski Club brings teams up on a weekly basis to train, resulting in at least 2 Olympic XC skiers – Simi Hamilton and Hailey Swirbul - whose early training at Spring Gulch was instrumental in their success. Spring Gulch has also launched many of our valley youth to Junior Olympics.

The Spring Gulch Trail System is possible due to the hospitality of the North Thompson Cattlemen’s Association and the Crystal River Ranch who generously permit the winter use of their property for the community’s skiing enjoyment. The cattlemen are on record supporting the proposed administrative withdrawal due to their assessment that oil and gas development is not compatible with their historic ranching operations.

Though Carbondale was historically a coal mining town, the mine has been closed and reclaimed for decades. Rather than following the typical pattern of economic collapse when the mines close, Carbondale has successfully transitioned to today’s recreation economy. Now the town is recognized as a recreationalist's paradise - “Base Camp” is its brand. Laying at the foot of the magnificent 12,953-foot Mt. Sopris and surrounded by scenic working ranches, Carbondale’s recreation economy thrives on the clean air and water, scenic vistas, and vast forests with abundant wildlife that surround our community.

The Thompson Divide occupies nearly 225,000 acres of prime, mostly roadless, wildlife habitat, including a dozen watersheds that provide clean water to domestic and agricultural users here in the Crystal Valley. The Divide is relied upon for its multi-use values - by local grazers for summer range, sportsmen for its superlative hunting and angling opportunities, and recreationists for a broad range of year-round activities. All combined, the Thompson Divide supports hundreds of jobs and contribute tens of millions annually to local communities.

The Mount Sopris Nordic Council has been a member of the Thompson Divide Coalition since its inception 15 years ago. Our convictions about protecting this special place, the Thompson Divide, remain strong. More specifically, we urge you to implement a 20-year mineral withdrawal for the Thompson Divide under the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act. We view this administrative

action as an interim protection measure until the area can be permanently protected via the passage of the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy (CORE) Act.

Sincerely,

Mike Shook

Board President

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