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Organization:

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Comments: Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments regarding the GMUG Forest Plan revision during the scoping period.

I am a resident of Ouray County and an active outdoorswoman. Though I enjoy nearly every non-motorized sport across the seasons, my absolute favorite experience in our national forests is multi-day solo backpack trips in Wilderness Areas. I engage in this activity for the solitude, primitive recreation, wildlife watching and tracking, wildflower extravaganzas, scenic splendor, and connection to the land, which for me borders on the sacred/spiritual. It is with this focus, I write to express my strong support for the Citizens' Wilderness Designation Proposal (Citizens Proposal.)

Wilderness advocates - individually and collectively - have hiked the proposed landscapes; utilized maps, data and Google earth; engaged with knowledgeable community members, stakeholders and elected officials; and met with USFS District Rangers and staff in order to draft this Citizens' Proposal. The landscapes proposed are valued for their naturalness, scenic beauty, wildlife and wild flora, recreation; hunting; and solitude. Many of them include critical wildlife habitat and linkages essential for the resiliency and sustainability of species impacted by fragmentation, human development, extractive industries, drought, climate change, etc. Some of them include phenomenal geologic features; others host sensitive or threatened species; yet others encompass notable cultural and/or historic sites.

I will speak to the landscapes in Ouray County which I know best having hiked and backpacked in the region for over a decade.

The proposed Baldy Mountain/Baldy Trail polygon constitutes a valuable addition to the Uncompahgre Wilderness. The area is an upper tier Colorado Roadless Area. Elk, deer, bear and dusky grouse occupy this landscape and elk utilize it as winter range and production area. The views toward the Cimarron Range and throughout the Uncompahgre Valley are superb. This lower elevation landscape also possesses habitats/vegetation types underrepresented in the nation's Wilderness System. Though local mountain bikers (and I am a cyclist) have an interest in this area, it is currently closed to mechanized use and Colorado Parks and Wildlife opposes mountain bike recreation in the area due to the critical wildlife habitat.

The Bear Creek addition to the Uncompahgre Wilderness was designated as part of the Uncompahgre Primitive Area back in the early 1930s, and though not evaluated under the Colorado Roadless Rule, the area is closed to motorized and mechanized use. The Bear Creek Trail is a national recreation trail. The proposed polygon possesses all the characteristics of wilderness plus some mining relics and historic building that attract history enthusiasts. Geologic values such as the Bear Creek gorge, tidal ripple marks and various water features from cascading fall to trickling moss/algae gardens all warrant protection. This area also provides bighorn sheep, elk, and bear habitat. One memorable experience was watching a mature, golden-haired bear across the creek (who was unaware of my presence) feeding voraciously. Only last summer, I was finally able to access the upper reaches of the Bear Creek basin and was dazzled by the wildflowers, intrigued by the signs of bighorn sheep (though I never saw any) and flabbergasted by the turquoise hue of the South Fork of Bear Creek that reminded me of Havasu Creek and the Little Colorado River in the Grand Canyon! I had never heard mention of this phenomenon right here in Ouray County, and what a delightful surprise. Though I had visited the Grizzly Bear Mine site several times, I had never before seen the Yellow Jacket Mine. I found the historic buildings and mining relics culturally/historically significant, a welcome attraction, and, though noticeable, definitely not a detractor from wilderness eligibility. In addition to the entire Bear Creek watershed, this proposed polygon extends north to include parts of Cascade Mountain (hosting a healthy mixed conifer forest) and Bridalveil Creek - both west of

Bridge of Heaven. This entire area offers spectacular views and habitat for bighorn sheep, elk, dusky grouse, and other wildlife. The long distance and steep ascent from the north and west Horsethief Trailheads limits recreational use thereby affording excellent opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation.

The proposed Hayden Mountain polygon extending from near Black Bear Road (atop Red Mountain Pass) at its southern boundary north to Camp Bird Mine Road (aka CR 361) constitutes a critical habitat, reproduction area, and corridor for elk. I have never hiked in this region during summer and fall months and not seen cow/calf pairs in considerable number. Opportunities for solitude abound. The geology is fascinating, and wildflowers are prolific. Many "routes" and a few very steep trails (namely Richmond and Hayden) offer access to this wild landscape so recreational use is minimal and one rarely sees other hikers across most of the acreage. Both Barstow and Greyhound Mines and their access roads have been excluded from the proposed wilderness and other mining activity is not substantially noticeable within the boundary. The old two-track between Barstow and Greyhound Mines is used now by locals as a hiking trail. Senator Beck Basin includes mining relics that are hidden until one stumbles upon them, and they are dwarfed by the expansive scenery and vast landscape. I am personally in discussion with local climbers about some popular climbing routes adjacent to CR 361 and Highway 550. As I learn more, the boundaries for the Hayden Mountain polygon will likely be refined to accommodate this recreational use. In my opinion, this Hayden polygon is a critical wildlife corridor, intact ecosystem, and an important source of water that warrants protection and management as wilderness.

Mount Abram and Brown Mountain polygon is proposed as a Special Management Area since this acreage does not meet the minimal size requirement for wilderness. Like Hayden Mountain, this landscape lies adjacent to wetlands and specifically the Ironton Fen. I have personally viewed Canada Lynx in this area as well as bobcat tracks, elk, coyote and deer. This long ridgeline hosts some of the most spectacular scenic views in the valley, and Mount Abram is an iconic peak viewed from the valley and treasured by residents and visitors alike. Grey Copper Falls defines the southern boundary with its scenic cascade. Given the rough 4-wheel drive access road and steep ascents mostly on game trails (with the exception of Grey Copper Trail,) this region offers extensive opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation while hosting expansive wildflower meadows.

The Whitehouse Addition to the Mount Sneffels Wilderness has long been valued for its wilderness characteristics, and is, as you know, currently under consideration for protection in the San Juan Mountain Wilderness Act. With steep ascents, limited access, and remote wild terrain, this polygon is the epitome of wilderness. I won't expand upon the value of this parcel as wilderness as it has already been recommended by the USFS as such. It is long past time that this polygon be added to the existing wilderness.

Finally, and outside the scope of the Citizens' Proposal (and probably more relevant to travel management,) I would like to highlight the wilderness qualities of the Nate Creek drainage/Nate Creek Trail north of Owl Creek Rd. This region boasts one of the healthiest aspen forests I have seen in the county with a diverse age class of trees and healthy regeneration. The understory is vibrant and diverse, and fertile soils host a plethora of forbs. Bird song is constant, and views span over 180 degrees from the Cimarron Range/Uncompahgre Wilderness south to Wildhorse Peak to the Sneffels Range and across Ridgway Reservoir and the Uncompahgre Plateau to the La Sal Mountains in the distant west. Scat and other signs indicate this area is home to elk, deer, coyote, turkey, and bear among other species. During today's hike I encountered no people, but saw several turkeys and came upon fresh bear scat returning to the trailhead that was not present on my outbound traverse! Nate Creek Trail crosses no less than nine creeks/tributaries (more than half of which were dry today) which sustains the lush vegetation providing a rich food source for diverse species. I recommend that this area be considered for some type of special designation (as it does not qualify for wilderness due to limited size.) I request the current motorized use during July through Labor Day be rescinded and that the area be closed to motorized and mechanized use. This healthy riparian habitat and aspen forest adjacent to magnificent geological features is not suitable for motorized/mechanized use and should be protected for its natural values, wildlife habitat, and opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation.

Once again thank you for the opportunity to comment. I whole-heartedly endorse the Citizens' Wilderness Designation Proposal!

Sincerely,  
Robyn Cascade