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Comments: Please accept this letter as Pitkin County's public comments on the Notice of Proposed Withdrawal and Public Meeting, Thompson Divide Area, Colorado, 87 Fed. Reg. 62878 (Oct. 17, 2022) as supplemented by 87 Fed. Reg. 68726 (Nov. 16, 2022). Pitkin County understands the next step will be further environmental review of the proposal under the National Environmental Policy Act and these comments will be used to identify elements to be addressed.

Pitkin County has long supported and participated in grassroots, administrative, and legislative efforts to permanently protect an area of federal lands within our boundary known as the Thompson Divide. The Thompson Divide is a largely pristine landscape, rare in the intermountain west, and is highly prized by sportsmen, sportswomen, ranchers and highly quality snowmelt-dominated headwaters that help furnish municipal, domestic, and agricultural water supplies. The area contains diverse, abundant native species and natural communities, as well as extensive, intact, and interconnected habitats. Existing uses in the Thompson Divide support hundreds of jobs and tens of millions in annual economic activity. Much of the area is roadless and undeveloped, which is consistent with Pitkin County land use planning. The Thompson Divide is rare and exemplary at a comparative national scale and its uses are not compatible with oil and gas activity.

Consensus for protecting the Thompson Divide cuts across party lines, and has united citizens and local governments of the Crystal River Valley to a remarkable extent. Rarely, if ever, do you see the entirety of a community from ranchers and downstream farmers that depend upon the runoff, to bikers and snowmobilers, to hunters, anglers and hikers unite and agree on protection and restriction on public lands. Our community is unified to see this land preserved for its existing values, and a 20 year withdrawal would provide important interim protection for the landscape and the communities that rely on it. Given the interconnected nature of the habitat and landscape and Gunnison County's support for the inclusion of lands not historically thought of as the Thompson Divide in the proposal. Pitkin supports the withdrawal of the entirety of the lands identified in the proposed plan for twenty years.

Pitkin County previously reached out to the Bureau of Land Management's ([ldquo]BLM[rdquo]) Colorado State Office to indicate interest in participating as a cooperating agency throughout the withdrawal process and reiterates its interest in cooperating agency status for all review stages of the withdrawal proposal.

In short, Pitkin County applauds Secretary Haaland, the Department of the Interior, BLM, the Department of Agriculture, and the Forest Service for initiating the process to the withdrawal the Thompson Divide area from new oil and gas leases. Pitkin County wholeheartedly supports the Thompson Divide Administrative Withdrawal and requests the Bureau of Land Management work expediently with all relevant agencies to effectuate the withdrawal and ensure it remains a priority.