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Organization: Town of Paonia

Title: Town Clerk

Comments: We are writing to express our strong support for the proposed Administrative Mineral Withdrawal for the Thompson Divide. It would provide meaningful protection for the revered public lands on the White River and Gunnison National Forests, essential public lands to the Town of Paonia.

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 in Western Colorado. The Divide is relied upon by local grazers for summer range and it is important for sportsmen and recreationists. Existing values in the area support hundreds of jobs and contribute tens of millions annually to local communities, including Paonia. The public lands in the Thompson Divide support our communities' quality of life and support our sustainable outdoor recreation-driven economies.

The Town of Paonia have long been proponents of protecting the Thompson Divide and have supported legislation like the Thompson Divide Withdrawal and Protection Act and the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy Act, which would permanently protect these lands from oil and gas development. We can think of no reason why this area shouldn't be withdrawn from new oil and gas leasing and mining for the next 20 years under the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) until a permanent legislative solution is passed in Congress.

Millions of people visit the Western Slope of Colorado each year, and our federal public lands contribute immeasurable to our economy and way of life, but we must have the vision to protect these landscapes and conserve wildlife habitat. We believe this administrative withdrawal will provide important interim protections for this critical area and urge the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture to proceed quickly and for this process to remain a priority.