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Title: Recreation, Open Space & Trails Supervisor

Comments: Town of Crested Butte comments re: Thompson Divide as approved at 1/2/2024 Town Council meeting.

Deputy Forest Supervisor Edwards

The Town of Crested Butte (Town) is pleased to continue working with the United States Forest Service (Agency) regarding the Thompson Divide Withdrawal (Project 63679). The timeliness of the Agency completing the Environmental Assessment (EA) in a thorough manner with reasonable analysis and response to our previous requests for cooperating agency status is greatly appreciated. >

Town encourages Secretary Haaland to utilize the authority granted to her under Section 204 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) to issue a Public Land Order that encompasses the entire withdrawal area as shown in the Agency application for the maximum allowable period of 20 years. Should an act of Congress be unachievable over the next two decades, this will allow a future secretary to extend the withdrawal for an additional 20 years until permanent action can be taken by Congress. Most importantly, Town strongly opposes a no action alternative.

With 72% of the withdrawal area lands showing low/no potential occurrence for oil & gas development, the proposal is an excellent candidate for approval. Throughout the EA, it is repeatedly shown that the benefits of implementing the Thompson Divide Withdrawal far outweigh the economic gain that could potentially be realized by issuing new oil & gas leases in the area. With the West Elk Mine significantly contributing to economic diversity in Gunnison County, the Thompson Divide proposal continues to work towards a balanced economy that drives so many to live & recreate here.

The potential impacts to scenery, grazing and rangelands, watershed resources, terrestrial wildlife, and the environment from extractive industries are too extensive to allow this withdrawal to not be implemented. This reasoning is laid out well throughout the EA and Town feels the Agency has done a thorough job in the evaluation overall.

Due to false information spread along the West Slope regarding the Thompson Divide Withdrawal, it is important for our constituency that it be stated, as it is explicitly stated in the EA in Chapter 2, under Alternative A (page 3), that "Aside from activities that would be prohibited by the withdrawal, all activities currently consistent with the applicable forest plans or resource management plans and applicable laws and regulations, including public recreation and other USFS or BLM management activities (e.g., timber management), could continue under alternative A. People would continue to enjoy and use the lands of the Thompson Divide ...".

Town continues to be impressed overall with the Agency's timeliness and application of logic in the EA and other documents. As a cooperating agency, we will continue to contribute to the process as needed and look forward to Secretary Haaland's PLO in the coming months.