Data Submitted (UTC 11): 1/10/2020 7:00:00 AM
First name: N
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Organization:
Title:
Comments: Cancel the Valle Seco Land Exchange in Colorado

Dear Becca Smith,

Please carefully reconsider, and ultimately cancel, the proposed Valle Seco Land Exchange. It would be wrong to trade away wilderness-quality roadless lands right next to the South San Juan Wilderness. I oppose any loss of public access to the San Juan River, or of protections for what has been formally recommended as a wild and scenic river.

As you know the South San Juan Wilderness is among Colorado's most pristine areas; the adjacent roadless lands in question have been proposed for wilderness designation for more than 20 years. The San Juan National Forest previously deemed wilderness designation unnecessary because the lands were protected under the Colorado Roadless Rule. It would therefore be a betrayal to turn around and give away these wilderness-quality public lands just because a billionaire wants them.

What's more, in 2013 the East Fork of the San Juan River was recommended by the Forest Service for protection as a wild and scenic river, after decades of advocacy by anglers, boaters and other river supporters. It would be a huge violation of the public's trust to reverse course and privatize this public resource.

It is also unacceptable to give away a stretch of the only public access to the San Juan River upstream of Pagosa Springs. Access to rivers is a growing concern in Colorado, as recently highlighted by Colorado Gov. Jared Polis. It would be a major mistake to take away existing public access for no other reason than to please someone who lives out of state.

Given the controversial nature of eliminating wilderness-quality roadless areas and rivers recommended for wild and scenic designation for private benefit, this proposed land exchange must be cancelled.

If the Forest Service does proceed, the proposal must be analyzed rigorously in an environmental impact statement, since the harms would be significant and contrary to the public interest. And the process must be transparent. The public deserves the same access to decision-makers and documents as the lawyers and lobbyists enjoy.

Finally, if the overriding purpose of the project is acquisition of Valle Seco for the value of its big-game wildlife habitat, then a more feasible and widely supported approach is for the Forest Service to purchase the 880-acre Valle Seco property using the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which Congress is moving to permanently fund at $900 million per year.

Please do the right thing and cancel this project, keeping these PUBLIC lands in public hands.

Sincerely,

N Houghton

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