

**Written Statement of Kathy Chandler-Henry
Eagle County Colorado County Commissioner**

**U.S. House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee
Hearing on H.R. 3397**

June 15th, 2023

Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Grijalva, and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to H.R. 3397, and to express my support for the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) proposed Conservation and Landscape Health or Public Lands Rule.

I was lucky to grow up in the small town of Eagle, in the central mountains of Colorado. Spending time on my family's ranch and exploring the mountains and surrounding public lands instilled in me a conservation ethic to protect these places for my children and their children to enjoy.

When I graduated high school, Eagle County only had 7,000 residents. Now there are 56,000. Our surrounding public lands, ranching heritage, and thriving outdoor recreation economy make Eagle County a uniquely desirable place to call home, raise a family, or to visit to ski, hike, boat, hunt or fish. But we are in danger of loving these lands to death. Our public lands are challenged by the impacts of a changing climate, continued population growth, and increased demand for natural resources, development and outdoor recreation. Balancing the demands on natural resources with protecting our mountain ecosystem is one of the top goals of the Eagle County commissioners.

The proposed Public Lands Rule helps with this balancing act by clarifying the ability of the BLM to consider conservation values when developing Resource Management Plans. It allows us, in concert with the BLM, to manage for resilient ecosystems, especially important in this time of threats to western water and increased wildfire dangers. And finally, the Public Lands Rule promotes the BLM's mission of multiple use and allows collaboration among users, including timber, grazing, extraction, mining, and recreation to mitigate and restore our treasured public lands.

Consideration of Conservation Values

Over 80% of Eagle County's nearly 1.1 million acres is public lands. Eagle County is home to portions of the White River National Forest (the most-visited national forest in the nation with over 17.8 million visitors per year - more than Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, and Rocky Mountain National Parks combined). Eagle County is also home to Eagles Nest, Holy Cross and Flat Tops Wilderness Areas, and the BLM's Castle Peak and Bull Gulch Wilderness Study Areas.

About a quarter million acres in Eagle County are managed by the BLM. Like the rest of Colorado, where only 16% of BLM's 8.3 million acres are durably protected, most of those Eagle County lands are not permanently conserved.

These public lands contribute to our world-class outdoor recreation experiences and help ensure our local economy thrives. Maintaining the historic ranching cultural identity alongside tourism and ski resorts can be seen throughout Eagle county with numerous grazing allotments on BLM and Forest Service lands.

I'd like to applaud the BLM for creating a new tool - conservation leases - as part of the proposed rule. These "leases" would be temporary, allowing local groups to work with BLM on restoration projects or renewable energy companies to enter into leases for compensatory mitigation purposes to offset the impacts of projects on public lands elsewhere. This is a very promising and complementary tool to support intact, well functioning landscapes across my County and around the West.

Clarification in the proposed rule that appropriately balances conservation values with other types of land practices will allow the BLM to create management plans that benefit rural economies like ours.

Management for Resilient Ecosystems

The proposed Rule furthermore establishes a guiding principle that BLM manage for resiliency in public lands through protection of intact, native habitats, and restoration of degraded habitats.

Eagle County is a headwaters County. Our community members rely on public lands not only for their quality of life and wildlife habitat, but also to provide our communities with safe drinking water. Water from Eagle County flows into the mighty Colorado River and helps provide water for drinking, agriculture, power and industry for 40 million people

downstream. Maintaining healthy watersheds that can be resilient in the face of drought and fire is a priority for our County and our state, and we believe the proposed BLM rule will assist in that resilience.

Multiple Use and Collaboration

Eighty-five percent of BLM lands in our local field office are open to oil and gas development. These include popular recreation and wildlife areas on the Colorado and Eagle Rivers. We've worked for years to protect these areas and prevent permitting of potentially damaging uses that could fragment these intact landscapes.

The management of public lands has a significant impact on our local communities. Having a federal land management partner with clear direction to work with local communities on balancing multiple uses, including conservation – like what is proposed in the new rule – will only strengthen the collaboration we already rely on and will provide our communities with more certainty that our needs will be considered in BLM planning and land management decisions.

These BLM lands play an important role in supporting world-class recreation opportunities that create Colorado's \$9.6 billion outdoor recreation economy. Tourism and outdoor recreation account for roughly 50% of Eagle County's \$181 million in annual revenues. Eagle County has worked hard to create a diversified economy that includes and balances development while conserving our world class public lands. We rely on having federal land management partners that work with us to balance these needs.

If enacted, H.R. 3397 would tie the hands of the BLM, undermining the agency's ability to ensure conservation of critical public lands in Eagle County and across the West. The bill not only derails the agency's effort to balance conservation with other multiple uses, it puts an end to any "substantially similar rules." H.R. 3397 would prevent the agency from balancing its management practices, preventing local managers from working with communities like Eagle County to protect important recreation and conservation areas vital to our economies and ways-of-life.

I would like to commend the BLM agency staff who have led an inclusive public process. They have conducted outreach to solicit feedback and information on the proposed rule that they can consider before revising and proposing a final rule. I appreciate that the BLM offered a 75-day public comment period and hosted five informational meetings, including one in Colorado. H.R 3397 would shut down and lock

out the public's ability to participate and provide meaningful feedback on this important rule before the comment period is over.

Conclusion

I support the BLM's proposed public lands rule. It will empower the agency to deliver on its multiple use mandate by placing conservation values on equal footing with other uses on our public lands. As climate change, energy development, recreation and tourism pressures continue to grow in Eagle County and Colorado, this rule will promote ecosystem resilience. Clarification of BLM's multi-use approach and providing tools to collaborate with all users is the best method of managing these public lands we love.