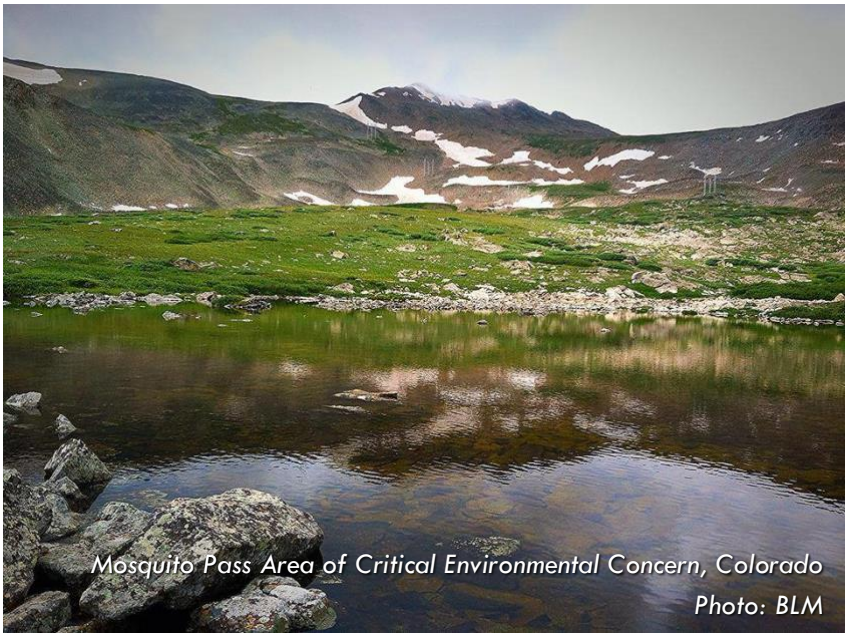
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT DECISIONS IMPACT THE THINGS WE CHERISH MOST ABOUT COLORADO

Bold Administrative Action Is Needed To Ensure Future Our State's Unique Way-Of-Life

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages 8.3 million acres in Colorado including three national conservation areas, 54 wilderness study areas, five wilderness areas, and two national monuments. The agency also manages a national historic trail, a national scenic trail, two congressionally designated management areas, five historic landmarks, a national historic district with 56,333 cultural resource sites and two national natural landmarks.

These public lands are critical to the state's recreation and outdoor economy, with $37 billion in annual consumer spending, and are home to hundreds of thousands of world-renowned trail systems and remote backcountry areas. These lands are vital to Colorado's big game and wildlife populations with 700 species of fish and wildlife and 145 special-status plants and animals. These lands also play a critical role for farming and ranching communities by ensuring water resources and healthy rangelands.



Mosquito Pass Area of Critical Environmental Concern, Colorado
Photo: BLM

Yet, despite the important role BLM public lands play for communities across the state, **only 16% are durably protected. Given the growing pressures and societal costs we've already seen from climate change, the BLM needs to do more to ensure these special places are protected and bring these lands into balance with our needs.** Fortunately, there are some immediate actions the agency can take, including:

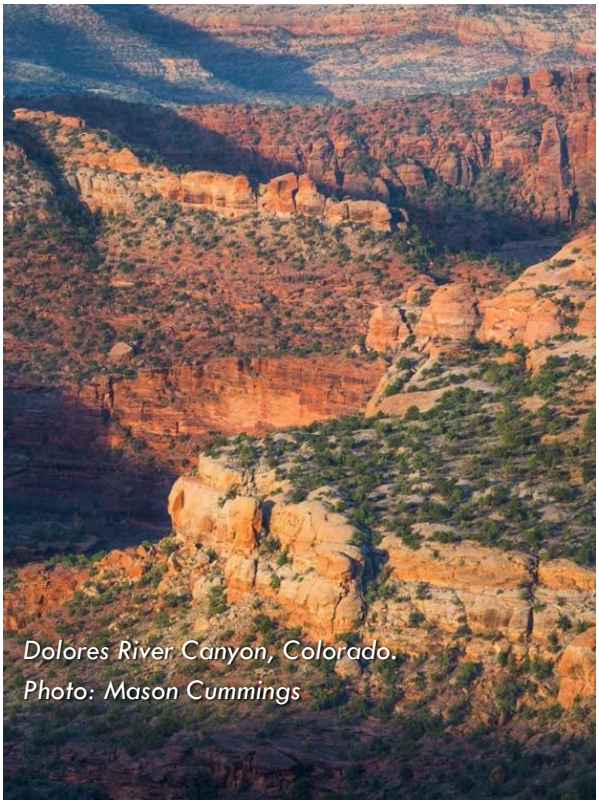
Wilderness Study Areas: The BLM has identified nearly 2 million acres of Lands with Wilderness Characteristics (LWCs) in Colorado. Many of these lands could be protected as

Wilderness Study Areas or otherwise managed to protect their outstanding wilderness resources through the agency's ongoing planning processes, such as the Colorado River Valley and Grand Junction Field Office Supplemental EIS, and the statewide Colorado Big Game Resource Management Plan Amendment, the Eastern Colorado Resource Management Plan Revision and the upcoming Uncompahgre Resource Management Plan Amendment.

New WSA designation or expanding existing WSAs in Colorado could be used to increase conservation management for inventoried wilderness quality lands such as Castle Peak and other wildlands along the Upper Colorado River, the Vermillion Basin and BLM wildlands near Dinosaur National Monument, as well as wildlands in the Dolores River Canyon Country.

Areas of Environmental Concerns: The BLM also manages over 700,000 acres of Areas of Critical Environmental Concerns (ACEC) across the state. These are areas where BLM has determined that special management attention is needed to protect important historic, cultural, scenic or biological values. Unfortunately, these are often areas of critical environmental concern in name only. In Colorado, BLM has designated 92 ACECs to protect important resources such as cultural sites, rare plant assemblages, scenic areas, paleontological sites, and riparian habitats. While the agency has identified these critical resources as deserving of protection as ACECs, they are often not managed as such.

BLM is correctly refocusing its attention on highlighting the importance of ACECs in fulfilling BLM's multiple use and sustained yield mission while providing additional clarifications to guide how BLM designates and manages ACECs going forward. This renewed emphasis will lead to new durable protections for critical resources, but only if BLM acts swiftly to evaluate existing ACEC nominations and prescribe meaningful protections for the resources therein.



Dolores River Canyon, Colorado.
Photo: Mason Cummings

ACECs are already used to help protect irreplaceable cultural sites and unique, fragile habitats in places like the Dolores River Canyon Country in Western Colorado. Expanded use of this under-utilized tool could protect wildlife habitats, riparian areas, cultural and historical sites, plant species and stunning scenery broadly on Colorado's BLM public lands.

Colorado Supports BLM Conservation

Lawmakers, businesses, and Coloradans across the state want to see more administrative protections by the BLM. Senators Bennet and Hickenlooper, along with other western Senators, sent the Administration a letter encouraging them to do more to protect more lands managed by the BLM; and similarly, Representative DeGette also submitted comments to the BLM encouraging them to protect more WSAs as part of the Grand Junction/Colorado River Valley Resource Management Plan echoing similar calls for conservation in the region by the Outdoor Recreation Coalition of Grand Valley.

In addition to our congressional leaders, and businesses, local elected officials who live in communities that depend upon BLM lands have also called for greater protections. In May of 2022, 57 Colorado elected officials joined 120 of their western peers on a letter calling for greater BLM conservation, and Eagle and Pitkin counties joined the cities of Aspen and Glenwood Springs on a letter to the BLM state director calling for more conservation on BLM lands around their communities. Organizations also recently urged the BLM to manage these lands to maintain, improve, conserve, & restore degraded fish and wildlife habitat to increase habitat connectivity.

American Basin ACEC, Colorado.
Photo: BLM

There is growing momentum across Colorado and around the West for bold conservation action by the BLM. This action will be critical to ensure the economic and environmental future of communities across the state. As the Grand Junction Sentinel pointed out in an editorial, the BLM has done a great job managing for multiple uses but they need to do more to prioritize the conservation part of their mission. Similarly, The Durango Herald editorialized in January 2023 saying, "we're calling on the Biden administration and Interior Secretary Debra Haaland to provide direction to BLM in Colorado on using conservation tools to protect the delicate, otherworldly places here in our backyard."