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Guest commentary: Sen. Gardner's public lands record isn't fit for Colorado

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By William S. Infante, Elyse Hottel, Rebecca Mirsky, Andy Wiessner And Bruce Brown Guest commentary

Sen. Cory Gardner, Colorado's junior senator, trumpets his support for our country's public lands — but his advocacy runs shallow when it comes to protecting Colorado's wildlands. Because of his inaction, the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy (CORE) Act has languished in his committee without a vote. This bipartisan bill that would protect Colorado's public lands is the most broadly supported legislation in a generation. The majority of the Colorado congressional delegation supports the bill, which the House of Representatives has passed twice.

Coloradans overwhelmingly support the conservation of our public lands. Our mountains, forests, rivers and lakes define our identity and play a critical role in driving economic and cultural vitality in many Colorado communities, like those in the Roaring Fork Valley. Sadly, Sen. Gardner has repeatedly dodged supporting the CORE Act, instead stating that he won't block the bill, that he "does not oppose the bill" and that he's "not holding it up or objecting to it." Consequently, the bill has sat idle for 18 months in the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, of which Sen. Gardner is a member. Colorado needs a champion who will protect our state's wildlands with full-throated conviction, not weak-kneed dithering.

The CORE Act honors the legacy of veterans who trained at Camp Hale as part of the Army's legendary 10th Mountain Division and will ensure that our children can continue to enjoy the legacy of this beautiful place by designating 28,728 acres surrounding the camp as a National Historic Landscape. The act safeguards our ranching and farming heritage, and provides important protections for both the Curecanti National Recreation Area and the San Juan Mountains. It will help secure the hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation-dependent economies of towns across the state. The act is broadly supported by local government, hunters, ranchers, miners, small businesses and ski resorts.

Protecting Colorado's public lands is good for our economy. Our public lands generate jobs and provide livelihoods. According to a 2017 Colorado Parks and Wildlife report, outdoor recreation supports over 511,000 jobs in the state representing 18.7% of the labor force and generates \$21.4 billion dollars in salaries and wages annually. Conscious of the economic power of outdoor recreation, Sen. Gardner co-authored a 2017 letter with Sen. Michael Bennet and former Governor John Hickenlooper in an effort to entice the Outdoor Retailer Trade Show to move to Colorado. The trade show was leaving Utah because the Beehive State was seeking to rescind protections for national monuments, including Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante.

In part, the joint letter said: "The Centennial State offers tremendous business opportunities for the outdoor recreation community, and we want to emphasize our ongoing commitment to protect the public lands that support a robust outdoor recreation economy in our state. ... In Colorado, we know that protecting and promoting public lands is not a partisan issue — it's just good business. ... We continue to work together as a delegation on new legislative efforts to protect our public lands and promote their balanced management throughout Colorado."

Sen. Gardner hasn't followed through in "protecting and promoting [Colorado's] public lands." Since the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964, Sen. Gardner is, in fact, one of only two Colorado senators who has failed to pass wilderness legislation while in the Senate. A long list of his fellow Republican Senators: Peter Dominick, Hank Brown, Ben Nighthorse Campbell, and Wayne Allard all passed legislation protecting Colorado wilderness. Sen. Gardner's failure to pass significant new protections for our public lands is a sad blemish on the long, proud and bipartisan history of support for wilderness protections in Colorado.

Passage of the CORE Act is what Colorado needs and deserves. As Colorado's sole senator on the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Sen. Gardner should heed the calls of Coloradans and help pass the CORE Act. As our country and state struggle to respond to the coronavirus pandemic, this legislation provides an antidote for our economy and will protect the public lands that are the bedrock of Coloradans' identity.