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## PUBLIC LANDS

### Colo. leaders look to flip Gardner on wilderness bill

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Published: Friday, October 2, 2020

Sen. Michael Bennet (D-Colo.) is pushing defense bill negotiators to keep public lands legislation included by the House. Francis Chung/E&E News

Dozens of local Colorado elected officials rolled out their latest plea to Sen. Cory Gardner yesterday, urging the Republican lawmaker to make an eleventh-hour endorsement of a bill that would create tens of thousands of acres of new wilderness and recreation areas in the state.

At the same time, the legislation's authors, Colorado Democratic Sen. Michael Bennet and Rep. Joe Neguse, looked to increase pressure on congressional leadership to include their bill in the final version of the fiscal 2021 National Defense Authorization Act.

Both efforts aim to gain a last-minute pathway for **H.R. 823**, the "Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy (CORE) Act," between the final weeks ahead of Election Day and the end of the 116th Congress.

"The public lands protected in the CORE Act are important to sportsmen and ranchers, and help to sustain Colorado's \$28 billion outdoor recreation economy," Neguse and Bennet **wrote** to the leadership of both the House and Senate Armed Services committees.

The bill would designate 73,000 acres of new wilderness along with about 80,000 acres of new recreation and conservation management areas, which can be used for activities like hiking and biking. In addition, it would also create the first National Historic Landscape by designating 28,000 acres around Camp Hale.

The proposal would also prohibit new oil and gas development on 200,000 acres in Colorado's Thompson Divide, which has long been at the center of a contentious debate over extraction.

But while the Democratic-controlled House has twice passed the legislation — including adding the measure to this year's version of the NDAA — the bill has hit a roadblock in the Senate, where it has failed to gain traction with the Republican majority.

Local Colorado officials organized by the Mountain Pact — a nonprofit that advocates for federal policies on climate, public land and outdoor recreation — implored Gardner to press the bill in the Senate.

"Public lands are the backbone of our mountain communities," states a **letter** signed by more than 100 local county commissioners and mayors. "This bill will protect our public lands and outdoor recreation opportunities to boost the economy as we recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic."

But Gardner, who serves on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, is a staunch opponent of the proposal, pointing to concerns raised by outgoing Rep. Scott Tipton (R).

A Tipton spokesman called the mineral withdrawal in the Thompson Divide a "non-starter." Tipton, who represents the 3rd District, which covers the state's Western Slope, lost his reelection bid in the GOP primary earlier this year (*E&E Daily*, Aug. 12).

Whether the measure can survive the NDAA conference committee likewise remains a serious question. Gardner, who is not on the Armed Services panel, has said he will not stand in the way of the bill.

But while Democrats had hoped to pressure Gardner over the issue — the first-term senator faces a competitive reelection challenge from former Gov. John Hickenlooper (D) — timing on a final NDAA package may have neutralized those plans.

Congress is not expected to vote on a final package of the must-pass bill until after Election Day (*E&E Daily*, Sept. 21).

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