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OPINION COLUMNS

Opinion: On public lands, conservation is just as valuable as extraction

The BLM's proposed Public Lands Rule will help balance the demands on natural resources with protecting our mountain ecosystem



Kathy Chandler-Henry

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I recently testified at a U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources hearing in Washington, D.C. to express my support for the Bureau of Land Management's proposed Public Lands Rule.

Growing up in Eagle, I was lucky to spend time on my family's ranch, exploring the mountains and surrounding public lands. These experiences instilled in me a conservation ethic to protect these places for my children and their children to enjoy. Our well-loved public lands, ranching heritage, and thriving outdoor recreation economy make Eagle County a uniquely desirable place to call home, raise a family, 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.

Nearly 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.

In fact, 85% 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.

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 is critical for the arid West.

The proposed Public Lands Rule will help balance the demands on natural resources with protecting our mountain ecosystem. This rule empowers BLM to deliver on its multiple use mandate by placing conservation values on equal footing with other uses on our public lands. Existing uses will not be threatened or challenged by this new rule.

Clarifying BLM's multi-use approach and providing tools for the agency to collaborate with all users are the best methods of managing these public lands we love. The proposed rule will allow the BLM to create management plans that benefit rural economies like ours, while establishing a guiding principle that BLM manage for resiliency in public lands through protection of intact, native habitats, and restoration of degraded habitats.

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, 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.

Western congressional leaders, businesses, and local elected officials who live in communities that depend upon BLM lands have been calling for greater protections of BLM lands for years. I recently joined more than 80 fellow Colorado local elected officials urging the BLM to adopt a strong Public Lands Rule. Similarly, last year I joined 120 western peers in a letter calling for greater BLM conservation, and Eagle and Pitkin counties joined the cities of Aspen and Glenwood Springs in a letter to the BLM state director calling for more conservation on BLM lands around our communities.

As climate change, energy development, recreation, and tourism pressures continue to grow, this rule will promote ecosystem resilience. I urge the BLM to adopt a strong Public Lands Rule to conserve and protect our nation's

important public lands, wildlife, and waters in tandem with locally-led efforts to advance conservation across the west now and into the future.

Kathy Chandler-Henry, of Eagle, is chair of the Eagle County Commission.