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Colorado leaders urge Gardner to take action on CORE Act

By Josue Perez



Morrow Point Reservoir, Curecanti Needle.
(Lisa Lynch/NPS)

A Thursday conference call hosted by The Mountain Pact, an effort to mobilize elected officials in western Colorado mountain communities, saw Colorado mountain community elected officials urge Sen. Cory Gardner to take action on the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy (CORE) Act, designed to protect 400,000 acres of public land in Colorado with 80,000 acres to be developed into recreation and conservation management areas.

The call comes the day 111 elected officials in Colorado sent a letter to Gardner.

“Public lands are vital to Colorado and our way of life, especially as we navigate this pandemic,” said Eagle County Commissioner Matt Scherr during the call. “Because the CORE Act has not had adequate support from Colorado, we’ve been unable to celebrate significant new protections for our public lands while many of our western state neighbors have seen hundreds of thousands of acres of new public lands protected.

“I urge Sen. Gardner to take action to move the CORE Act, the most widely supported public land bill for Colorado in a generation, through the Senate this year.”

The CORE Act has heavy support in Colorado from delegation, passing with bipartisan support twice through the House of Representatives (for a second time in October last year).

Elected officials aren’t the only ones in Colorado who support the bill. Ranchers, conservation groups, and industry representatives would like to see the CORE Act move through the Senate before the end of the year, said Lance Waring, county commissioner in San Miguel County.

“The CORE Act is the most widely supported public lands bill for Colorado in a generation. It’s a result of true collaboration with diverse stakeholders, with input from ranchers, sportsmen, outdoor industry representatives, mountain bikers, conservation groups, and thousands of Coloradans,” he said.

The bill would protect many of Colorado’s historic lands and its features, including Camp Hale (training home of the 10th Mountain Division, which would be designated as a first National Historic Landscape through CORE), Thompson Divide and its wildlife, Curecanti National Recreation Area west of Gunnison and the San Juan Mountains with its water supply.

Though Colorado Sen. Michael Bennet and House Rep. Joe Neguse are feverishly seeing that the bill moves through the Senate — Bennet pushed to tack the bill onto the Great American Outdoors Act — Gardner has not moved the needle on whether he supports or opposes the bill. Last year, shortly after the bill passed, Gardner told The Colorado Sun that it was important for U.S. House Rep. Scott Tipton to support the bill. Tipton, at the time, was seeking amendments to the bill, as was Gardner — the senator also wasn’t in favor of passing legislation in an area where the bill would have its largest effect, and not having it backed by a member of Congress (Tipton) raised concerns.

Two of Tipton's primary concerns with the bill, Carbondale Mayor Dan Richardson said, was language around the continuation of grazing on affected lands, and the recapture of methane gas. Richardson added Bennet's office accommodated the language.

Since the bill's second passing, several elected officials have reached out to Gardner and his office, and a few have met with Tipton, including Richardson in late 2019.

"[Tipton] indicated that we were close to getting his support if we took care of a couple things, which we think we did," Richardson said during the call. "We firmly believe we've checked all the boxes to have his support."

Summit County Commissioner Karn Stiegelmeier said she and other members of the county have met with Gardner in Washington D.C. and in Colorado.

"In each case, he has listened very well and responded that he thought it was very positive, but he just hasn't taken action," Stiegelmeier said.

The CORE Act combines four previous legislation initiatives: the San Juan Wilderness Act, Thompson Withdrawal and Protection Act, Curecanti National Recreation Area Boundary Establishment Act, and the Continental Divide Recreation, Wilderness, and Camp Hale Legacy Act.

Through CORE, 73,000 acres of land would be designated as wilderness (including in the San Juan Mountains), formally establish the boundary for the Curecanti National Recreation Area, and around 200,000 acres in the Thompson Divide area, southwest of Glenwood Springs, would be withdrawn and protected from future gas and oil projects.

During the call, elected officials also urged the importance of the bill's ability to help the economy recover during the pandemic.

"This bill will protect our public lands and our outdoor recreation opportunities while boosting the state's economy as we recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic," Waring said.

Montrose County Commissioner Roger Rash said last year he had concerns with the bill, and even with potential amendments that Tipton requested, his stance has not changed.

“I’m still absolutely against it,” he said. “I feel we have more than enough wilderness area than there is.”

Rash mentioned the recent fires in Colorado as issues that arise as a direct result of the CORE Act, and added he’s been “absolutely against it since day one.”

“We don’t need more wilderness area,” Rash said.

Rash is concerned with the loss of jobs in the oil and coal industry during the pandemic and its effect on the economy — Halliburton, a large oilfield service company, laid off 130 Weld County workers in April.

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