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## Need BLM to prioritize wildlife habitat, migration corridors

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In Southwest Colorado, we are fortunate to be located near many Bureau of Land Management lands, where residents and visitors recreate, camp, view wildlife, hunt and fish. Thanks to the remote nature of the area and the San Juan Mountains, we are lucky to have some of the best habitat for wildlife, such as mountain lions, bears, mule deer, elk, moose – even threatened species like the Canada lynx – and the endangered wolverine and New Mexico meadow jumping mouse.

Millions of acres of our BLM lands in Colorado also constitute high-priority seasonal and migratory habitats for big game animals, such as elk, mule deer, pronghorn and bighorn sheep. These animals are important for healthy ecology and biodiversity. Hunting, fishing and watchable wildlife contribute \$5 billion every year to Colorado's economy, while supporting 40,000 jobs.

Yet many BLM lands are at risk. In Colorado, BLM lands make up one-third of the federal public lands in our state, but only 8% of these lands are permanently

protected, significantly less than the amount of protected public lands managed by other agencies.

At the same time, suitable habitats for our wildlife are under greater pressure from climate change, forcing animals to migrate farther to adapt to the changing climate. *The Durango Herald* and *The Journal* recently reported that “wildlife numbers are on the decline in Southwest Colorado and plummeting worldwide.” We should do all we can to ensure the continuing biodiversity of important wildlife species that live in our area by working across local, state and federal lines, to ensure wildlife connectivity and habitat protection.

This summer, we celebrated the new U.S. Highway 160 wildlife crossing overpass between Durango and Pagosa Springs. This crossing is expected to reduce collisions involving vehicles and wildlife by 85%, and will allow mule deer and elk safer passage across the highway. The success of this project is the result of years of collaboration and coordination with Tribal nations, government agencies and organizations.

While we celebrate the new crossing, there is still work to be done to ensure that our federal, state and local lands are managed to prioritize wildlife connectivity. Local elected officials across Colorado and the West want the BLM to do more to protect public lands. This year, over 120 Western mountain town local elected officials (nearly 60 from Colorado) signed a letter, calling on the BLM to do more for conservation in the coming years.

Our federal partners at the BLM have been engaged in numerous resource management planning processes across the state. First among them has been a statewide plan amendment focused on improving big game corridors.

The BLM also recently released an Instruction Memorandum to “ensure habitat connectivity, permeability and resilience is restored, maintained, improved, and/or conserved on public lands.” The BLM can and must work with our communities across the West to identify and protect additional Lands with Wilderness Characteristics; and increase and use conservation designations, such as Backcountry Conservation Areas, Wilderness Study Areas and Areas of Critical Environmental Concern to maintain, improve, conserve and restore degraded fish, and wildlife habitat to increase habitat connectivity and migration corridors.

The wildlands and wildlife in Southwest Colorado are a tremendous asset to our communities. We need strong federal partners like the BLM to continue to prioritize the conservation of important wildlife habitat and migration corridors across the state. Together, we can ensure a bright future for our region's wildlife and wildlands.

*Anna Peterson is the executive director of The Mountain Pact in Durango, an organization that works with nearly 100 Western mountain communities to speak with a collective voice on federal climate, public lands and outdoor recreation policy.*