

Congress of the United States
Washington, D.C. 20510

March 6, 2023

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write to share our ongoing concerns about the risks to Colorado's communities, water, land, air, and climate from the Uinta Basin Railway Project.

The U.S. Forest Service has yet to issue the Special Use Authorization for construction of a railway that would run through the Ashley National Forest. We urge you to formally suspend any decision on that authorization until a supplemental review is conducted to fully evaluate the effects of this project on Colorado's local communities and environment. This review is especially critical in light of the recent train derailment and environmental disaster in East Palestine, Ohio, which has laid bare the threat of moving hazardous materials by rail. Until a robust, supplemental review is completed, we urge you to prevent this project from moving forward.

The Uinta Basin Railway Project would enable the shipment of up to 4.6 billion gallons of waxy crude oil per year from Utah through Colorado to the Gulf Coast on as many as five, two-mile-long trains per day. These trains would run for over 100 miles directly alongside the headwaters of the Colorado River (the River) – a vital water supply for nearly 40 million Americans, 30 Tribal nations, millions of acres of agricultural land, and a main driver of our state's recreation and tourism economies. The River is already in crisis, unable to provide the water needed to meet demand.

A train derailment that spills oil in the headwaters of the River would be catastrophic not only to our state's water supplies, wildlife habitat, and outdoor recreation assets, but also to the broader River Basin. In addition, an accident on the train line further increases wildfire risk at a time when the West already faces severe drought. Many Colorado communities along the proposed railway are still recovering from extreme wildfires, other disasters like severe flash flooding and mudslides, and managing water levels at unprecedented lows. It is beyond reckless to expose these sensitive areas of our state to these additional risks. Nor should we endanger the residents of Denver, where the project is estimated to quadruple the number of rail cars carrying hazardous materials through the city.

The Forest Service previously advanced the project based on a deeply flawed environmental and risk analysis that understated its potential dangers. But even that flawed analysis concluded that the risk of a derailment in Colorado would double due to the Uinta project, and that our state should expect an oil spill roughly every four years.

Congress of the United States
Washington, D.C. 20510

We urge you to work with other relevant federal agencies to undertake a supplemental review to ensure the federal government has sufficiently accounted for all possible adverse effects of this project in Colorado, including the risk of fires and oil spills along the River.

We have heard grave concerns from an array of local governments, water districts, and other stakeholders along the proposed rail line.

Although we agree it is vital to secure our domestic energy supply, we do not accept that it requires imperiling the Colorado River or the local communities that live along it. The disaster unfolding in East Palestine, Ohio is a terrible reminder that train derailments do occur, and that the damage from transporting hazardous materials by rail can be catastrophic.

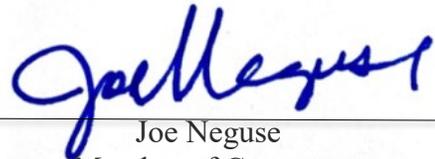
We urge you to prevent this dangerous project from moving forward until a robust supplemental review can be completed.

We look forward to hearing from you on this important matter.

Sincerely,



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Joe Neguse
Member of Congress