January 26, 2022

The Honorable Tom Vilsack, Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20250

RE: Request to Block Forest Service Right of Way That Will Undermine President Biden’s Climate Goals

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

The undersigned groups representing millions of supporters working to protect our climate, national forests, and communities from the climate emergency request that you stop the United States Forest Service’s plan to approve a right-of-way through the Ashley National Forest that
would enable construction of the proposed Uinta Basin Railway resulting in a quadrupling of fossil fuel extraction in the Uinta Basin and degrading a National Forest roadless area. The Forest Service deadline for resolving our objections to the draft record of decision is March 5, 2022.

This new railway and the oil trains it will facilitate, will cause 53 million tons of carbon pollution a year to be emitted into the atmosphere, equal to six dirty coal plants, and otherwise do tremendous harm to the environment, including increasing the risk of oil train and climate driven wildfires.

The stated purpose of the railway and the financial basis for it, is to quadruple fossil fuel extraction in Utah’s Uinta Basin from the current level of 80,000 barrels per day, to 350,000 barrels per day. Further, because the proposed rail line is intended to transport crude oil to Gulf Coast refineries, the project will adversely affect disproportionately impacted communities already exposed to particularly elevated levels of air and water pollution.

Many of the undersigned organizations have communicated our concerns to the United States Forest Service prior to issuing draft approval of the right of way, including to the Ashley National Forest Supervisor, and Forest Service Chief Randy Moore.

We were astonished by Chief Moore’s response letter to us in support of the project that characterized the railway as comporting with President Biden’s Executive Order 14008 concerning the climate crisis. Specifically Chief Moore wrote that: “The Forest Supervisor determined the proposed use of the project is in the public interest and supports President Joseph R. Biden’s policies outlined in Executive Order 14008 to rebuild our infrastructure for a sustainable economy.”

Chief Moore is incorrect—the Uinta Basin Railway directly conflicts with the President’s order.

Executive Order 14008, “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad” sets as U.S. policy the goal of “significant short-term reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and net-zero global emissions by mid-century or before.” To that end, President Biden has set a goal to reduce U.S. emissions by 50-52% from 2005 levels by 2030, just eight years away. Section 213 of E.O. 14008 further states that the administration “shall take steps, consistent with applicable law, to ensure that Federal infrastructure investment reduces climate pollution, and to require that Federal permitting decisions consider the effects of greenhouse gas emissions and climate change.” And, section 201, of E.O. 14008, further states that “It is the policy of my Administration to organize and deploy the full capacity of its agencies to combat the climate crisis to implement a Government-wide approach that reduces climate pollution in every sector of the economy...).
Contrary to E.O. 14008, the intended purpose and stated goal of the railway is to *increase fossil fuel extraction on public lands in the Uinta Basin*. Increased drilling and extraction the railway seeks to induce will boost greenhouse pollution at every step in the process: from extraction, to transportation, to refining, to combustion. The infrastructure investment solely enabled by the issuance of this discretionary right-of-way thus contradicts the President’s stated climate policy.

In addition to worsening the climate crisis, the railway would cause irreversible environmental damage. According to the environmental analysis that the Forest Service relies on, the Uinta Basin Railway would alter more than 400 Utah streams and strip bare or build on 10,000 acres of wildlife habitat, including areas on Forest Service land designated as “crucial” habitat for bighorn, deer, and elk. In Emma Park, a remote sagebrush valley known to birdwatchers, bulldozers and train traffic would drive imperiled greater sage grouse out of their mating and nesting grounds and, it is feared, wipe them out from the region. Virtually the entirety of the railway on the Ashley National Forest, totaling 12 miles, would be built in an inventoried roadless area protected by the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, and according to the Forest Service, degrade roadless area values by building five bridges and blasting three tunnels up to 2100 feet wide.

The railway will also inflict harm downstream where the trains would be headed through Colorado to Gulf Coast refineries at a time when western states are reeling from drought, wildfires and pollution caused by the climate emergency. Federal documents show that 672 to 1,809 oil trains each carrying approximately 642 barrels of crude oil would leave the Uinta Basin each year. These trains would increase the risk of fires and oil spills along the route through Colorado, including the vulnerable Colorado River corridor. The western slope of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado would likely experience increased ozone pollution resulting from increased fossil fuel production drifting into Colorado from the neighboring Uinta Basin.

The harm from this proposed railway will exacerbate the climate emergency, increase the risk of wildfires and oil spills, put pressure on our already strained rail system and increase pollution while undermining President Biden’s goals to address the climate crisis.

We therefore, respectfully request that you protect the public interest by instructing the Forest Service to reject the proposed right-of-way through the Ashley National Forest.

Sincerely,

Randi Spivak            Center for Biological Diversity
Micah Parkin            350 Colorado
Patricia Hine            350 Eugene
Sherry Pollack           350 Hawaii
Selden Prentice            350 Seattle
Daniel Villa              350 Tacoma
Honorable Jackie Biskupski 35th Mayor of Salt Lake City
Karen Bueno               Accelerate Neighborhood Climate Action
Maayan Cohen              Action for the Climate Emergency (ACE)
Steve Holmer              American Bird Conservancy
Michael Fiebig            American Rivers
Kestrel Kunz              American Whitewater
Sarah Stewart             Animals Are Sentient Beings, Inc
Bob Hamel                 Arkansas River Outfitter Association
Billy Marquis             Arkansas River Tours
Heather Cantino           Athens County's Future Action Network, acfan.org
Marie Venner              Businesses for a Livable Climate
Marie Venner              Call to Action Colorado
Mark Meeks                Capitol Heights Presbyterian
Stefanie Klass            Catholic Network US
Randi Spivak              Center for Biological Diversity
Linda Rudolph             Center for Climate Change and Health
John Stansfield           Central Colorado Wilderness Coalition
Sid Madison               Central Jersey Coalition Against Endless War
Natasha Leger             Citizens for a Healthy Community
Jim Smith                 CO Businesses for a Livable Climate
Karen Dils                Collegiate Peaks Chapter Trout Unlimited
Julie Mach                Colorado Mountain Club
Scott Denning             Colorado State University
Fred Kirsch               Community for Sustainable Energy
Luke Schaffer             Conservation Colorado
Clayton Dewey             Democratic Socialists of America
Michael Browning          Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance
Earth Action, Inc.        Earth Action, Inc.
Jane Pargiter             EcoFlight
Kathy Albury              Elders Rising for Intergenerational Justice
Tara Thornton             Endangered Species Coalition
Ellen Montgomery          Environment America
Patrick Kelly-Fischer  Environmental Action
Joan M. Gregory  Environmental Ministry, First Unitarian Church of SLC
Thomas Wheeler  Environmental Protection Information Center
Leah Redwood  Extinction Rebellion San Francisco Bay Area
Ronald J. Martin, Ph.D.  Fresnans against Fracking
Michael Kunkel  Friends of Browns Canyon
Jim Miller  Friends of the Bitterroot
Debbie Bruell  Garfield County Democratic Party
Shelley Silbert  Great Old Broads for Wilderness
Bradley Angel  Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice
Alex Veilleux  HEAL Utah
Matt Reed  High Country Conservation Advocates
Matt Holloway  Holloway Educational Resources
Cheryl Barnds  Honor The Earth
Rachael Lehman  I-70 Citizens Advisory Group
Philip Beck  Indivisible Ambassadors
Elizabeta Stacishin  Indivisible Colorado
Jennifer Mamola  John Muir Project
Marie Claire Egbert  John Muir Project of Earth Island Institute
Debbie Thornburg James  Mayfair Park Neighborhood Association Board
Amy Petré Hill  Mental Health & Inclusion Ministries
Nic Venner  Metro State University, Our Children's Trust Juliana case
Emmett Hobley  Montbello Neighborhood Improvement Association
Marc Coles-Ritchie  Mormon Environmental Stewardship Alliance
Rene Voss  Natural Resources Law
Oscar Simpson  New Mexico Sportsmen
Margaret Rossoff  No Coal in Oakland
Jerry Rivers  North American Climate, Conservation and Environment
Kristi Douglas  North Range Concerned Citizens
Judy Lord  Peaceful Uprising
Cheryl Barnds  RapidShift Network
Oscar Simpson  Rio Grande Indivisible, NM
Roz McClellan  Rocky Mountain Recreation Initiative
Alison Gallensky  Rocky Mountain Wild
Christine Canaly  
San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council

Jeff Hart  
Save EPA

Dick Cumiskey  
Sevier Citizens for Clean Air & Water

Rebekah Ashley  
Sierra Club Utah Chapter

Marie Venner  
Small Business Alliance

Nathan Taft  
Stand.earth

Zack Porter  
Standing Trees

Jean Tepperman  
Sunflower Alliance

Maura Stephens  
System Change Not Climate Change

Tim Duda  
Terra Advocati

Harmony Cummings  
The Green House Connection Center

Ruth E. Kastner  
The Quantum Institute

Fran Aguirre & Deb James  
Unite North Metro Denver

Tony Frates  
Utah Native Plant Society

Jonny Vasic  
Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment

Raphael Cordray  
Utah Tar Sands Resistance

Paddy McClelland  
Wall of Women

Daniel E. Estrin  
Waterkeeper Alliance

Susan Jane Brown  
Western Environmental Law Center

Joro Walker  
Western Resource Advocates

Chris Calwell  
Western Slope Businesses for a Livable Climate

John Sztukowski  
Wild Connections

Jeremy Nichols  
WildEarth Guardians

Juli Slivka  
Wilderness Workshop

Katherine Quaid  
Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN)

Renée M. Chacon  
Womxn from the Mountain

Cc:
Senator John Hickenlooper
Senator Michael Bennet
Representative Joe Neguse
Representative Diana DeGette
Randy Moore, Chief, US Forest Service
Sean Babbington, USDA Senior Climate Advisor
Meryl Harrell, Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment Gina McCarthy,
David Hayes, Special Assistant to the President for Climate Policy
Gina McCarthy, White House National Climate Advisor
Tracy Stone-Manning, Director, Bureau of Land Management