

**Statement for the Record**  
**S. 241, the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy Act**  
**Senator Michael Bennet**  
**November 18, 2020**

**The Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests & Mining**  
**The Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources**

Thank you Chairman Murkowski and Ranking Member Manchin, and Subcommittee Chairman Lee and Ranking Member Wyden, for providing the opportunity to submit testimony for the record.

Background

I started working on the various components of S. 241, the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy (CORE) Act over a decade ago, and I'd like to share a little bit about what I've learned. In 2009, I joined former Senator Mark Udall in introducing the San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act. Around that time, I also started talking with local leaders, ranchers, and sportsmen about their interest in new protections for parts of the Thompson Divide. These proposals are now Title II and Title III of the CORE Act.

Shortly after, in 2011, at the request of Gunnison County, I began working on legislation to formally authorize the Curecanti National Recreation Area. And in 2015, I joined veterans and community leaders to find a way to protect public lands along the Continental Divide and protect, restore, and commemorate Camp Hale. These two proposals now represent Title IV and Title I of the CORE Act, respectively.

Over my decade of working on this bill, I've had the opportunity to visit and recreate in many of the places the CORE Act would protect. I've also had the chance to hear from Coloradans about why the public lands protected in the CORE Act are so important to them. In the last year – in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and with record high visitation to our outdoors – a few stories really stand out.

Over the summer, in Telluride, Colorado, while hiking through the aspens above town, I heard how public lands drive the region's outdoor recreation-based economy and how public lands have provided residents and visitors alike a refuge to keep their spirits high during the pandemic.

In August, I went to Gunnison where I met with members of Trout Unlimited, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, the National Wildlife Federation and the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership. Standing on the banks of the Gunnison River, I heard how the CORE Act would safeguard so many special places in Colorado – including miles of blue ribbon trout stream and thousands of acres of elk habitat. We also talked about how the CORE Act would finally expand public fishing access in the Upper Gunnison Basin.

In early September, I traveled to the west side of Colorado's iconic Eisenhower Tunnel with Congressmen Joe Neguse and Jason Crow, to meet with county commissioners and veterans.

There, we talked about the CORE Act's protection of a critical migration corridor across I-70, and the importance of protecting Camp Hale's landscape and history.

Each of these spots reminded me why we must pass the CORE Act.

I must emphasize that we are not at this point by chance. Rather, we are here because of the hard work of so many Coloradans, over the last decade, to hammer out compromise and find the best way forward. To identify shared values and, despite disagreements, to work together to find solutions. To broker compromises, adjusting boundaries, and modifying designations, until each of the four proposals reflected local interests. I am so grateful for their work. Coloradans have written this bill.

Each proposal, the Continental Divide Recreation, Wilderness, and Camp Hale Legacy Act, the San Juan Mountains Wilderness Act, the Thompson Divide Withdrawal and Protection Act, and the Curecanti National Recreation Area Act, is a testament to our state's collaborative spirit, hard work, and tireless dedication to our public lands. It is an example that Washington should follow.

In 2019, Coloradans started to combine their efforts, recognizing that each of the proposals complements the others, and that an integrated package could bring people from different walks of life together in common cause for the benefit of our state. I agreed, in part, because I felt like one region or one proposal should not be prioritized ahead of any other in Congress. That is why we combined these four proposals into a single bill, called the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy (CORE) Act.

### Highlights

The Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy Act is a bold vision for our state's public lands. Together, the bill protects over 400,000 acres of public land in Colorado, including new wilderness and recreation areas, and permanent protection for landscapes like the Thompson Divide, where Teddy Roosevelt went bear hunting in 1905, and Camp Hale, where the 10th Mountain Division trained for mountain warfare prior to World War II.

The CORE Act would grow our economy by permanently securing and protecting opportunities for biking, hiking, skiing, grazing, hunting, and fishing in some of the most beautiful places in our state.

This includes:

- Snowmobiling, skiing, and backcountry hiking at Camp Hale, the true birthplace of Colorado's ski industry – and arguably the outdoor recreation industry itself;
- Backcountry skiing, camping, and hiking in the San Juan Mountains at Ice Lake Basin, near Silverton, and in Waterfall Canyon outside of Ophir;
- World-class mountain biking in thousands of acres near Breckenridge, including a portion of the Colorado Trail, and local trails in the Ophir Valley near Telluride, where this bill has the formal support of the San Miguel Bike Alliance;

- Nearly 7 miles of Gold Medal fishing, 100 miles of native cutthroat trout habitat, and 12 cutthroat trout lakes, according to a Trout Unlimited report, along with expanded public fishing access in the Upper Gunnison River Basin;
- Hunting in the Thompson Divide, and across our state, by protecting nearly 100,000 acres of important migration corridors for elk, mule deer, and other big game, including the only north-south wildlife migration corridor over I-70; and
- Conserving summer grazing lands for long-time Colorado ranchers.

It also addresses unique land management needs in Colorado by:

- Establishing a pilot program to lease and generate energy from methane leaking from coal mines, to support the North Fork Valley economy, improve air quality, and address climate change;
- Releasing around 3,000 acres of the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness Study Area (WSA), with the support of Mesa and Delta County, and portions of the existing McKenna Peak WSA in San Miguel County;
- Taking a balanced approach to new wilderness protections near Ouray, by working with Ouray Silver Mines, to allow for mining plans to proceed while protecting much of the area as wilderness, as requested by Ouray and San Miguel counties; and
- Protecting all existing water rights and ensuring that no existing roads or designated motorized trails are closed.

Finally, the bill includes a first-of-its-kind designation, the Camp Hale National Historic Landscape, which would honor Colorado's military legacy at Camp Hale. In the 1940's, American soldiers from all across the country were sent to Camp Hale, in the mountains outside of Leadville, to train to become the nation's first military climbers and skiers. When these soldiers deployed to Italy, they led Allied forces to victory, including the Battle of Riva Ridge, where they surprised the Nazis by scaling a seemingly impossible mountain route. This was exactly the type of combat that the 10th Mountain Division prepared for in the mountains surrounding Camp Hale.

But the Camp Hale story doesn't end with victory in World War II. After the war, many 10th Mountain Division veterans came back to Colorado to start ski resorts, ski patrols, and ski schools throughout the state and country. As we prepare for ski season in Colorado, we owe a debt of gratitude to the veterans who served and then came back to build the outdoor recreation industry that exists today.

Last February, I joined veterans from the 10th Mountain Division, 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment at Camp Hale. The group had come to Camp Hale to celebrate the legacy of the 10th Mountain Division during the 75th anniversary of the 10th Mountain Division's pivotal World War II battles. They told me that – after serving in Iraq and Afghanistan – they still come back to the mountains of Colorado and to the birthplace of the 10th Mountain Division to find peace and solitude on our public lands. They reminded me that there's a whole new generation of veterans who are returning to our public lands as a way of re-acclimating to civilian life.

For all of these reasons, the 10th Mountain Division is an indelible part of our history. In September, I heard a stirring account from Pitkin County Commissioner Greg Poschman whose father served during World War II with the 10th Mountain Division and then returned to Colorado to join the ski industry. He implored us to finally get the CORE Act over the finish line. I also heard from Nancy Kramer, President of the 10th Mountain Division Foundation, whose father also served in the 10th in Italy. Nancy and Greg told me that we owe it to the last few surviving World War II veterans to finally, formally protect Camp Hale before these veterans are gone.

The new Camp Hale National Historic Landscape designation would do just that. It will honor and permanently protect this unique landscape, a landscape that doesn't exist anywhere else in the world. Rich with history and a source of peace and solitude for veterans. And a place that embodies so many of our values, our commitment to our veterans, and our commitment to protecting our public lands.

### Support

With such a diversity of locally developed, and decades-in-the-making, land management designations, protections, and safeguards, it is not surprising that the CORE Act enjoys support from across the State of Colorado. Most importantly, the CORE Act has the full support of 7 counties, 12 towns and cities, and the State of Colorado. Every county affected by the bill has approved the part of the bill in their county. A coalition of outdoor businesses and recreation user groups – including the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA), the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP), the International Mountain Bike Association (IMBA), and members of the Conservation Alliance – also support the CORE Act.

The bill has the support of countless conservation organizations such as The Wilderness Society and the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks, which, speaking on behalf of five retired superintendents of Curecanti National Recreation Area, strongly support the formal establishment of the Curecanti National Recreation Area. As I mentioned, the support for the bill continues to grow to include new businesses and community leaders – such as New Belgium and 35 other Colorado craft breweries who expressed their support earlier this year.

Coloradans asked Congress to pass the CORE Act, and its components, for many years. Last year, the House finally acted on those wishes and passed the CORE Act with bipartisan support. Then, this summer, the CORE Act was included as part of the House's Fiscal Year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, and passed the House for the second time.

I would like to recognize and thank my colleague, Representative Neguse – and all of the members of the Colorado delegation – for their leadership in passing the bill through the House.

Coloradans have waited too long for these proposals to become a reality. It is our time to act in the Senate. I look forward to working with Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin, and the members of this Committee to do our job in the Senate, respect the wishes of Colorado, and pass the CORE Act into law.