

Press Release

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Victory for Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area and Rocky Mountain National Park Wilderness

Congress passes Omnibus Public Lands bill designating more than 300,000 acres of wilderness in Colorado and 2 million nationwide

DENVER – Colorado conservationists, local elected officials, and civic organizations lauded the U.S. House of Representatives’ passage today of the Omnibus Public Lands Bill. With this vote, Congress has signed-off on the creation of the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area (NCA), including the popular Dominguez Canyon Wilderness, in western Colorado and protection of Rocky Mountain National Park’s pristine backcountry as wilderness.

“Thanks to the dedication of members of Colorado’s congressional delegation, the land management agencies, and conservation advocates statewide, iconic landscapes such as Rocky Mountain National Park and Dominguez Canyons will now be protected as designated wilderness,” said Suzanne Jones, Regional Director of The Wilderness Society. “The Omnibus Public Lands Bill is one of America’s biggest environmental accomplishments in two decades and a great victory for Colorado.”

The Omnibus Public Lands Management Act now goes to President Barack Obama to officially sign it into law. In addition to providing permanent protection for Rocky Mountain National Park and Dominguez-Escalante NCA, the omnibus package designates more than two million acres of wilderness nationwide and makes permanent the National Landscape Conservation System, of which Dominguez-Escalante NCA is a part.

“The gateway communities to the Park have been pushing for the fulfillment of this vision for many years,” said Estes Park Mayor Bill Pinkham. “Finally, the renowned backcountry of Rocky Mountain National Park—which is so important to our local identity and economy—will be protected for future generations.”

“The collaboration leading to this legislation represents the efforts of not only county commissioners and federal agency personnel, but also local residents working together to retain our social and economic western culture while preserving the landscape of the Dominguez-Escalante,” said Delta County Commissioner Jan McCracken, who in July 2008 testified before a U.S. Senate subcommittee in support of the Dominguez-Escalante legislation.

Both of these much-anticipated public land designations were the result of multi-year, bipartisan efforts led by Colorado conservation groups, working closely with congressional offices, and the National Park

Service and Bureau of Land Management. These latest wilderness designations are Colorado's first since 2002.

"Today's vote represents another important benchmark in Colorado's proud history of preserving the world-class landscapes that make it such a special state to live and visit – and that provide the foundation of Colorado's \$10 billion outdoor recreation economy," said Elise Jones, Executive Director of Colorado Environmental Coalition. "We look forward to working with our leaders on both sides of the aisle to safeguard more spectacular Colorado treasures like these."

Both efforts have the support of recreation interests, in particular the mountain biking community, who worked to influence details of legislation for both areas. Specifically, conservationists worked with the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) to facilitate a study of possible riding opportunities along the west side of Rocky Mountain National Park, and to preserve biking opportunities within the Dominguez-Escalante NCA.

"After a long haul and much negotiation I'm thrilled to see this legislation finally pass," noted Chris Herrman, Grand Junction mountain biking advocate. "Those of us on the western slope are particularly excited to see the Dominguez-Escalante NCA join the existing McInnis Canyons NCA in accommodating a variety of recreational uses, including mountain biking, while protecting the integrity of the local environment and helping to further diversify our economy."

Members of the Colorado's conservation community – including the Colorado Environmental Coalition, Colorado Mountain Club, Environment Colorado, Western Colorado Congress, and The Wilderness Society, as well as other groups in the Southern Rockies Conservation Alliance – have been working for years to protect these important landscapes.

"Today we celebrate Congressional endorsement of two of the most deserving landscapes in Colorado," said Clare Bastable, Conservation Director of the Colorado Mountain Club. "Almost a century ago, members of the Colorado Mountain Club members took part in the founding of Rocky Mountain National Park. The decision in Congress to protect this landscape as wilderness, along with Dominguez Canyon and other deserving lands around the nation, calls for a great celebration."

The omnibus bill was passed today in the House of Representative on a 285-140 vote. The bill was supported by all Colorado House Democrats in today's vote and by both Colorado senators last week in the Senate.

Additional Background on Rocky Mountain National Park Wilderness

The Rocky Mountain National Park Wilderness will include the famous 14,255-foot Longs Peak, the remote Mummy Range, Wild Basin and 250,000 acres of other unroaded and undeveloped areas of the park. Wilderness recommendations for the Park were first made by the National Park Service under President Nixon in 1974; the bipartisan effort to push for congressional designation was led by former Congressmen David Skaggs and then Mark Udall for many years in the House, and pushed in the Senate by former Sen. Wayne Allard and former Sen. Ken Salazar. More recently, this effort was championed by Rep. Betsy Markey and Rep. Jared Polis, who reintroduced Rocky legislation in January 2009. Rocky Mountain National Park is the state's fourth national park to have wilderness designated within its boundaries.

"Millions of people visit Rocky Mountain National Park each year to see the wildness of the Rockies," said Judy Burke, Mayor of Grand Lake. "Now, we can know that the Park's scenic vistas we all love will remain for our future generations to enjoy."

“We would like to thank the members of Colorado’s congressional delegation who voted for this bill and former Senators Ken Salazar and Wayne Allard for their leadership in protecting these Colorado public lands that sustain both our environment and our communities,” added Kurt Kunkle, Public Lands Organizer for the Colorado Environmental Coalition. “This bill ensures that Rocky Mountain National Park will be preserved for the very reason it was created – to protect the Rockies in their wildest, most pristine state.”

Additional Background on Dominguez-Escalante NCA

The effort to conserve the Dominguez-Escalante landscape was led by former Senator Salazar, with support of former Sen. Allard, and pushed in the House by Rep. John Salazar. Known for its herds of desert bighorn sheep and ancient rock art illustrating the areas’ rich cultural history, the 210,000-acre Dominguez-Escalante NCA will encompass serpentine redrock sandstone canyons that slice deeply into some of the wildest quarters of the Uncompahgre Plateau west of Montrose and Delta. The 60,000-acre Dominguez Canyon Wilderness at the core of the NCA will protect Big and Little Dominguez canyons and the wildlife and solitude that are found in such great abundance there. The Dominguez-Escalante NCA is Colorado’s third NCA, following the success of nearby McInnis Canyons and Gunnison Gorge NCAs, all of which include wilderness areas at their core.

“Mountain bikers support the Dominguez Canyon bill because its Wilderness and bicycle-friendly National Conservation Area designations preserve traditional bicycle access while offering a high level of congressional protection for these important areas,” added Ryan Schutz, IMBA's Rocky Mountain Regional Director.

“There is wide and diverse local support for creating this national conservation area,” said WCC president Gretchen Nicholoff. “And the reason is simple: The quality of life in our region, which is so closely linked to our local economy, will be enhanced by the creation of the Dominguez-Escalante NCA and the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness.”

For more background information or photographs, please go to:

- <http://www.ourcolorado.org/what-we-do/wilderness/wilderness-area-proposals/cccw/p/greater-dominguez.html>
- <http://www.southernrockies.org/rocky/>