

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 21, 2022

The Honorable Debra Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St., NW – 6156
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Haaland:

We encourage you to use your authority under the Federal Land Policy Management Act (FLPMA) to provide protections for lands that demonstrate wilderness characteristics as Wilderness Study Areas. Protecting public lands in an undeveloped and natural state has significant positive impacts on our environment and climate.

We are grateful that the administration has prioritized protecting our public lands, and are appreciative of your efforts to restore the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments.

Our remote lands are overlooked sometimes in conversations about addressing the climate crisis, but their contributions will be crucial. Public lands not only support complex ecosystems, but also can sequester carbon and make areas more resilient to the impacts of climate change.

Under FLPMA, the Department of Interior has the authority to update inventories of the resources it manages—including areas that qualify for wilderness designation as well as areas of critical environmental concern (ACECs). Under section 202 of FLPMA, once such inventories have been completed, the Department may then move to administratively protect lands as new Wilderness Study Areas, managing them in a wilderness-like state that would help meet standards set forth by President Biden's goal to protect 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030 (30 x 30).

More than 29 million acres of public lands are in need of protection. For years, DOI has not utilized its ability to protect these lands, leaving places like the Vermillion Basin in Colorado, Granite Range in Nevada, the Bodie Hills in California, Hatch Canyon in Utah, Otero Mesa in New Mexico, and the Owyhee Canyonlands in Oregon without proper protection for their unique resources. Without proper protections, these lands face many threats that could jeopardize wilderness-quality values the Bureau of Land Management stated these lands have.

FLPMA directs the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to give priority to the designation and protection of ACECs. These are places where special management attention is required to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historic, cultural, or scenic values, fish and wildlife resources or other natural systems or processes. For decades, this designation has gone largely unrealized, with inconsistent identification, designation, and management. If fully embraced, ACECs can preserve and protect historical and cultural resources and sites as well as promote public access and enjoyment of the open air, outdoor areas and historic resources of the nation.

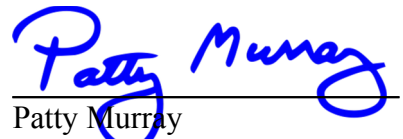
Though there are currently more than 1,000 designated ACECs encompassing almost 20 million acres across the western states (including Alaska), the BLM does not have minimum management standards for these areas. BLM also does not routinely prioritize the designation of new ACECs in its land use plans. We strongly encourage the BLM to promulgate regulations to fulfill Congress's intent that ACECs be designations with a clear set of management prescriptions.

Protecting Wilderness Study Areas would be a significant step to mitigate climate change and reach the administration's 30 x 30 goal. We support your commitment to addressing climate change, and strongly encourage your protection of public lands to help meet that goal.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



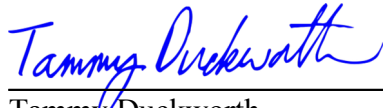
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