



www.coloradobackcountryhunters.org

TO: Congressman Doug Lamborn
FROM: Colorado Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
SUBJ: Browns Canyon Wilderness Designation

12 November 2007

Dear Representative Lamborn:

As you are aware, loss of habitat is the biggest threat to wildlife and hunting today, and hunters understand that habitat means wild, rugged country that still provides enough space and cover to support healthy populations of big game and other animal species. That's what we have in Colorado's proposed Browns Canyon Wilderness Area, but it's an increasingly rare and rapidly disappearing quality on our public lands.

From the standpoint of big game hunters and wild trout fishermen, the amount of key habitat being lost each year on Federal lands is making the American hunter and angler an endangered species. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, says David Havlick in *No Place Distant*, America's public lands are so strewn with roads and motorized access that "transportation management" now sits at the top of many agencies' list of priorities, and there is no longer a single place in the contiguous United States more than 20 miles from a road.¹

Today just 8 percent of the national forest acreage in Colorado lies beyond one mile of a road (only 4 percent for BLM lands), and there are enough Forest Service roads in the state to go from the Kansas border to Utah and back, 17 times. Given this accelerating degradation and loss of wildlife habitat across the country, we should take the advice of Theodore Roosevelt, and "preserve large tracts of wilderness...for the exercise of the skill of the hunter, whether or not he is a man of means."

As most hunters know well, to find the biggest and longest-lived elk and other big game, you have to find the best habitat: wilderness and roadless areas. Colorado BHA and NRA benefactor member Bill Sustrich hit the nail on the head when he said: "From my own observations, I have seen nothing yet created by mankind that offers the degree of habitat protection that is achieved through wilderness designation." Bill should know, having raised a family of four youngsters on deer, elk and trout that he hunted and caught in the Browns Canyon area.

Because of the excellent big game winter range, a source of water from the Arkansas River, and its relative remoteness, the proposed Browns Canyon Wilderness supports elk, mule deer, mountain lion, black bear and bighorn sheep, along with a wide variety of smaller wildlife. The protection provided by wilderness status is especially critical for these species during the stressful winter months when higher elevation habitat is snow covered and unusable.

¹ David G. Havlick. *No Place Distant*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2002, p.34

A Browns Canyon Wilderness would provide for excellent primitive hunting and backcountry experiences, and this limited core area of 20,000 acres is easily traveled by foot and horseback and provides a high quality hunting experience. In addition, the Browns Canyon area is readily accessed by a number of roads north, south and east along the Aspen Ridge Road. It is also used by several guides and outfitters in the central Colorado region.

The Turret Trail, on the other hand, does not provide access to good hunting areas nor does it help in transporting game. This trail is in the bottom of a draw. Given the area's extremely small acreage, motorized travel here only serves to move the deer, elk and bighorn sheep out of the area and away from hunters. Motorized access in the months of October through April also disturbs wildlife during the heavy stress months of winter.

For people who prefer to hunt with their ATVs, pickups, or SUVs, the 100,000-acre Four Mile Travel Management Area (FMTMA) and most other public lands in the county provide plenty of motorized hunting opportunities. Other BLM motorized areas a short distance from Salida and Buena Vista include: Texas Creek, Garden Park, Penrose Commons, Seep Springs Roads, Shelf Road and the Gulches, and Sand Gulch/Grand Canyon Hills. The FMTMA alone contains more than 195 miles of motorized routes.

As you know, wilderness protection is a balancing act, and public land should have some degree of accessibility for maximum enjoyment by the whole public. Clearly, the proposed Browns Canyon Wilderness Area is accessible, bordering on the extreme, and in the middle of all this accessibility is the region's last remaining backcountry hunting and wildlife haven, ringed on three sides by roads and trails, with rafters also able to easily access the area from the Arkansas River.

The unsettling spinoff threat of increased access (when there is so little backcountry habitat left) is that it ultimately undermines one of the general public's primary reasons for continuing to support our Second Amendment rights: the great tradition of public lands hunting. As access on already overly accessible public land increases, the health of wildlife habitat deteriorates, wildlife numbers decrease, hunting opportunities fade away, and so goes the most defensible reason for the nonhunting majority to allow us to keep (and bear) our guns *without restrictions* long-term.

In a nutshell, defending, designating, and protecting wilderness and roadless areas (the gold standard for wildlife habitat and hunting grounds) is in the long-run nothing short of defending our constitutional right to keep and bear arms. As wilderness and roadless areas go, so goes habitat and hunting and support from the gunless majority, and so eventually goes our Second Amendment rights.

The proposed Browns Canyon Wilderness provides unsurpassed opportunities for a wide range of outdoor recreation activities, including hiking and backpacking, hunting and fishing, camping, horseback riding, rock climbing, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, wildlife viewing, photography, canoeing, kayaking, and rock hounding. Local support for this proposed wilderness area is nearly universal and overwhelming. And as Bill Sustrich can confirm, the majority of local NRA members also back protecting this area as wilderness.

Organizations supporting it include: the Arkansas River Outfitters Association, Buffalo Peaks Back Country Horsemen, Chaffee County Running Club, Collegiate Peaks Trout Unlimited, Colorado Trout Unlimited, Trout Unlimited's Public Lands Initiative (TU-PLI), Colorado Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Colorado Wildlife Federation, Echo Canyon River Expeditions, Friends of Browns Canyon, International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA), National Wildlife Federation, Quiet Use Coalition, Salida Mountain Trails, the Arkansas Valley Cycling Club, and the Chaffee County Commissioners and Visitor's Bureau.

In addition, the USFS and BLM testified in favor of a Browns Canyon Wilderness during July 2006, and there was overwhelming support at the field hearing in July 2005. For the reasons above, and for the future of public lands hunting and angling, the Colorado Backcountry Hunters and Anglers wholeheartedly support the protection of Browns Canyon as wilderness.

Recently, CBHA and NRA member Paul Vertrees wrote Chris Cox of the National Rifle Association's Institute for Legislative Action (NRA-ILA) regarding Browns Canyon, and said in part, "I'm asking you to listen to the rank-and-file membership on this issue. Step back and assess what's really important, long-term, for the wilderness habitat and for future generations of sportsmen and women. This is not an access issue. This is a conservation issue. Let's do what's right."

In a similar letter to the NRA-ILA, life member Chas Clifton said, "I have hunted and fished in Browns Canyon...and I fully support its wilderness designation so that it will remain a high-quality outdoor recreation area. As a designated federal wilderness, Browns Canyon would remain completely open to hunting. And although I am 55 years old, I am not so feeble as to require motorized access everywhere I go hunting. Nor should most hunters. Colorado has plenty of heavily roaded public lands for those who do."

You can read these letters and others in their entirety by visiting the "Good Reading" section of the Colorado Backcountry Hunters and Angler's website:
www.coloradobackcountryhunters.org/Good%20Reading.html

Thank you, again, for your consideration on this important issue and for helping to preserve our nation's hunting and angling heritage for future generations of outdoorsmen and women.

Sincerely,

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