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BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND RECREATION

BODY:

My name is Ray Wright and I am the President of the Rio Grande Water Conservation District. The Rio Grande Water Conservation District is a government organization responsible for the conservation and management of the water resources of the Rio Grande drainage in Colorado. The valley through which the Rio Grande flows is called the San Luis Valley. The valley floor has an elevation of more than 7,000 feet above sea level and is surrounded by mountains rising above 14,000 feet. Although the winters are harsh, the valley is a prolific agricultural area growing more than a million tons of potatoes a year, along with brewing barley, vegetables, and alfalfa hay. Because the floor of the valley receives only 7 inches of rainfall per year, all of the agricultural production in the valley is dependent upon irrigation for its existence. There are more than five hundred thousand irrigated acres in the San Luis Valley. Underneath the San Luis Valley is a large ground water basin that is recharged from the rivers and streams. We rely on the groundwater, as well as the river flows for our livelihood.

The Rio Grande is the subject of an Interstate Compact among the States of Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas, which was signed in 1938. Under the Compact, the amount of water that can be consumed within the State of Colorado from both the rivers and the groundwater is closely regulated on an annual basis and the flow of the Rio Grande that Colorado is obligated to deliver to its neighbors is measured at a gauging station on the Rio Grande close to the New Mexico border. The amount of water which Colorado is entitled to consume each year was set in stone in 1938. It cannot be increased and it must include both the water that is consumed through the irrigation of our fields and that consumed by Mother Nature. Colorado has fully utilized the amount of consumption allowed by the Compact for over 60 years. It is for this reason that the enormous majority of citizens in the San Luis Valley support the legislation you have before you today. We are in the business of preserving what exists, both in terms of our agricultural economy and our natural environment. We are committed to protecting the valley as it is today against efforts to increase the drain on our valley's water resources to the detriment of her citizens, the citizens of the State of Colorado, and the citizens of the United States.

One of the unique features of the San Luis Valley is that the existing agricultural economy functions in harmony with the surrounding natural environment. I make my living as a potato farmer. Although my neighbors and I own the right to irrigate with river water, as well as with our wells, we have dedicated significant personal resources to develop recharge programs by which we take a portion of the flows of our rivers and streams and recharge them into the groundwater system. This has the benefit of protecting the ground water levels upon which the natural environment in the San Luis Valley depends, and it also provides a source of supply for our irrigation wells. Because of these circumstances, it is only logical that the Rio Grande Water Conservation District Board, on behalf of itself and the citizens it represents, would be supportive of a proposal to purchase a large tract of land on the eastern side of the San Luis Valley called the Baca Grant so that it can be included with the existing Great Sand Dunes National Monument,

to create a national park.

The Luis Maria Baca No. 4 was one of four patents of public land to the heirs of Luis Maria Baca which were made by Congress on the recommendation of the Surveyor General after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildalgo. The grant was originally 144,000 acres, although a portion of the north central part of the grant has now been subdivided. This is one of the largest blocks of undeveloped land in Colorado. It abuts the current national monument on the north, it contains almost a quarter of the actual sand dune mass and a significant part of the sand sheet which supports the sand dunes. It is the location of literally thousands of acres of natural wetlands and it is the home of herds of elk and a multitude of flora and fauna, some of which may well be threatened or endangered.

In the past, and even at the present time, the Baca Ranch has been a magnet for those who would speculate on the water resources of the San Luis Valley. Although these speculators have never met with success, there is still no lack of pitchmen willing to convince moneyed interests that enormous profits can be obtained through the development and sale of water resources under the Baca. The fact that Colorado's and the San Luis Valley's entitlement to consume water, both from man's activities-and nature's, has been set by the Rio Grande Compact for more than 60 years, does not seem to dissuade them. The fact that none of the previous speculators have had any success in proving the ability to extract more water from the aquifers of the San Luis Valley without doing irreparable harm to the valley's citizens and its environment does_not seem to dissuade them. Federal agencies, state agencies, and local citizens have spent literally millions of dollars opposing these speculative schemes. If the Baca Ranch is not acquired and converted to public ownership, untold additional millions will be required to continue to protect the existing environment of the valley, including the significant federal interests represented by the existing national monument, national wildlife refuges, and the Bureau of Reclamation's Closed Basin Project.

From our perspective, it makes abundant good sense for the federal government to acquire the Baca Ranch. It will allow the portion of the ranch that is so closely entwined with the existing Sand Dunes National Monument to be combined into a larger federally protected unit. It will allow the huge wetland complexes on the western side of the ranch to be managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service as an addition to the National Refuge System, and it will permit the portion of the Sangre De Cristo Mountain range, including several 14,000 foot peaks, currently located on the ranch and in private ownership, to be added to the Forest Service holdings and included within the Sangre De Cristo **Wilderness**.

In addition to authorizing the acquisition of the Baca Ranch, S. 2547 permits the designation of the existing Great Sand Dunes National Monument as a national park, and it significantly enlarges the boundaries of the Monument to include critical natural features essential to the protection of the sand dunes and their surrounding ecosystem by including lands currently under the management of the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the State of Colorado, and some private holdings within the Park. About 20 percent of the dune mass is currently located outside the Monument boundary_ and almost all of the sand sheet associated with the dunes is located on property not controlled by the monument. In addition, the headwaters of the two streams that flow around the sand dunes which create the phenomena that allow the dunes to grow so high are not within Park Service control. They are located within the Sangre de Cristo **Wilderness**, managed by the U.S. Forest Service. This legislation would bring all of the natural features essential to the protection of the sand dunes and the incredibly diverse eco-system associated with them into one unit and raises the level of protection and awareness of this magnificent natural wonder significantly.

Because the beautiful Sangre De Cristo **Wilderness** is an area where many of our

citizens hunt a variety of big game including mule deer, elk, and big horn sheep, incorporating the head waters of Sand and Medano Creeks into the national park would create a significant conflict.

Senator Allard, in S. 2547, has successfully avoided that conflict by proposing that the headwaters of those-streams be transferred into National Park Service control, but directed that they be-included as a Preserve and not as part of the Park. We strongly support this approach. It allows the complete protection of the natural features that are so much a part of the sand dunes and the surrounding eco- system, while at the same time permitting some flexibility in their management.

The Rio Grande Water Conservation District is responsible for the protection and management of the water resources of the San Luis Valley in Colorado. We are the local sponsoring entity for the Bureau of Reclamation constructed and operated Closed Basin Division, San Luis Valley Project. The Closed Basin Project is designed to regulate and salvage a portion of the water which flows into a sump to the west of the Great Sand Dunes. S. 2547 provides that the operation of the Closed Basin Project shall not be affected by the creation of a national park, and that is a wise and appropriate provision.

S. 2547 does permit the National Park Service to obtain the water rights necessary to protect the national park, but it must do so in accordance with federal and state law and without interfering with the existing non-federal water rights located to the west of the proposed national park. With these stipulations contained in S. 2547, there is no inherent conflict between the existing non-federal use of water in the San Luis Valley and the uses which would be made of the valley's water resources by the National Park. In fact, the relationship is symbiotic and supportive. This is one of the few areas in the United States where sustainable agriculture and the environment can, and do, function in harmony, and we do not fear an expanded federal presence as others in the West may.

It may surprise you to learn that the Rio Grande Water Conservation District has been the leader in negotiating settlements with the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Forest Service to permit those agencies to obtain federal reserved and appropriate water rights to protect the national interest. So long as decrees for those purposes are done in a thoughtful manner and with adequate compromises to protect the interests of the private citizenry, they do not need to become a threat to the western way of life. In fact, in the San Luis Valley of Colorado, on a water resources management level, we view the federal land managers from the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Park Service to be cooperating neighbors, rather than enemies. The language of S. 2547 adequately protects the water resource interests of the State of Colorado and the Rio Grande drainage. We would encourage you to adopt the bill in its current form.

Finally, we would like to note that there is a provision in the bill that preserves the opportunity to continue certain grazing activities within the exterior boundaries of the proposed national park. We support the inclusion of this provision. The Rio Grande Water Conservation District and the citizens of the San Luis Valley have a long-standing relationship with The Nature Conservancy. We have supported them in their efforts to acquire environmentally sensitive land and to manage it to obtain ecological balance. One of The Nature Conservancy's largest acquisitions, the Medano and Zapata Ranches would be within the exterior boundaries of the proposed national park. Those ranches, together with adjacent State leased land allow The Nature Conservancy to achieve an ecological balance by grazing buffalo. In order for that practice to continue, there needs to be assurance that The Nature Conservancy could continue to manage its land through the use of the buffalo herds. We encourage you to permit The Nature Conservancy to continue to manage its property in this way and to insure that the development of this area as a national park does not somehow thwart their admirable efforts.

As a closing remark, I would like to thank the Administration and the National Park Service employees who have worked so diligently with us to draft a bill that has all positive benefits and no clearly identified detriments. This is truly a win-win effort. We would also like to thank Senator Wayne Allard and Congressman Scott McInnis of Colorado for their support of Colorado, its citizens, and its environment. We are fortunate to have elected officials of this caliber.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Respectfully submitted Ray Wright.