

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0603

August 5, 2022

Mr. Scott Fitzwilliams
Forest Supervisor
White River National Forest
900 Grand Ave.
Glenwood Springs, CO 81601

RE: Sweetwater Lake Acquisition, Planning and Management

Dear Supervisor Fitzwilliams,

Here in Colorado's West Slope, we're home to a significant amount of federal land. When managed effectively, our public lands – including the Flattops Wilderness Area within the White River National Forest – can provide countless recreational opportunities for our fellow citizens. In fact, over 60% of Garfield County is comprised of public lands, split between the United States Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

As I'm sure you know, Sweetwater Lake was recently purchased by the Forest Service using funds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). This purchase adds almost 500 acres to the White River National Forest – and could help increase additional recreational opportunities and economic activity.

However, it also harms Garfield County, where the local government will lose out on a significant chunk of their tax base, which is needed to provide critical services. Garfield County has outlined specific policy statements that speak to the impact of private land acquisition on the local economy. I'd like to share them with you in case they offer additional insight into where local stakeholders are on this issue (Page 30 of 57).¹

I am also concerned that the process to purchase Sweetwater Lake – as well as the decision to make it a State Park – was executed without consideration of a Forest Land and Resource Management Plan or in compliance with existing forest policy. Ideally, the Forest Management Plan would have been edited to accommodate the acquisition, thereby allowing additional stakeholder input and ensuring some level of transparency into whether the acquisition under consideration would fit neatly with the existing Forest Plan.


¹ *GARFIELD COUNTY FEDERAL LANDS - NATURAL RESOURCES COORDINATION PLAN & POLICIES.* GARFIELD COUNTY. (n.d.). Retrieved August 3, 2022, from https://garfield-county.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=3&clip_id=1547&meta_id=170069

Equally concerning is the apparent direct contradiction between policies in the current USFS Forest Plan and the notion of a State Park. In this case, the Sweetwater Lake acquisition took place ahead of a Forest Plan amendment and management as a state park was apparently determined without due consideration of the surrounding Forest Plan land use classifications that are wholly incompatible with the intensity of use of a state park. National Forest System (“NFS”) lands northeast of Sweetwater Lake are managed for deer and elk winter range. NFS lands southwest of the lake are managed for forest flora and fauna habitats. All surrounding land has a guideline to either “restrict recreation activities that would disturb deer and elk during winter and spring periods” or to “enhance and restore habitat for native fishes.” Further, established travel management plans contemplate restricted use, low-standard, single-purpose roads in the area of the lake.

It's evident that there are numerous issues with how this acquisition was carried out; for starters, it's unclear whether the land use classifications in the Forest Plan would even be compatible with a State Park. Because of this and several other considerations regarding whether this acquisition is in full compliance with existing federal regulations, including the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), I would urge the White River National Forest to commit to amending the Forest Plan, obtaining the input of the public, fulfilling its obligations under the aforementioned laws, providing the necessary notice to the local government in Garfield County regarding the acquisition, and pursuing all necessary permits. There are numerous implications for residents and local wildlife alike that should not simply be glossed over.

As you begin to address some of the issues accompanying the acquisition of Sweetwater Lake, I request that you directly coordinate with Garfield County and their elected representatives on this issue that has enormous implications for local residents. I know you share my commitment to a transparent process, and I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,


Lauren Boebert
Member of Congress

CC: Garfield County Board of County Commissioners
Kevin Batchelder, County Manager
Fred A. Jarman, Deputy County Manager
Tari Williams, Garfield County Attorney