

**Testimony
of
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The Conservation Fund
on
H.R. 783, the Mesa Verde National Park Boundary Expansion Act
before the
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
United States House of Representatives**

July 19, 2007

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of H.R. 783, the Mesa Verde National Park Boundary Expansion Act.

I serve as the Director of Real Estate for The Conservation Fund, a national non-profit land conservation organization, dedicated to protecting America's land and water legacy for current and future generations. We work in partnership with landowners, federal and state agencies, non-profit organizations, businesses and local communities to conserve historic sites, wildlife habitat, working landscapes, recreational areas and community open space.

Mr. Chairman, The Conservation Fund expresses our appreciation to you for holding today's hearing on H.R. 783 and to Representative John Salazar and Representative Mark Udall for introducing this important legislation to expand the Mesa Verde National Park boundary to include two critical tracts of land. By authorizing a 360 acre boundary expansion at the Park entrance, H.R. 783 will enable the National Park Service (NPS) to acquire a 324 acre tract of privately-owned land with important archeological and natural resources along the Point Lookout Road corridor.

H.R. 783 will also authorize the NPS to accept a donation of a 38 acre tract of land from the Mesa Verde Foundation, a Colorado-based non-profit organization dedicated to supporting the mission of Mesa Verde National Park.

As stated in a recent letter to the Subcommittee, the Mesa Verde Foundation strongly supports H.R. 783, as this legislation will support the proposed construction of the Mesa Verde Research and Museum Collection Facility and Visitor Information Center. The proposed collection facility and visitor center will enable the NPS to better fulfill its mission as a steward of our nation's rich heritage and provide the public with expanded opportunities to learn about the Park's internationally significant cliff dwellings and the cultural heritage of the ancestral Puebloan people.

We appreciate the opportunity to work in close partnership with the Henneman family to conserve the family's 324 acres of land at Mesa Verde National Park for future generations. The family's land is located outside the Park boundary, adjoining Park lands and the 38 acre tract owned by the Foundation.

The Henneman family has owned their land for over 30 years. The Hennemans cherish their land and have served as excellent stewards of its archeological and natural resources and scenic values. Their land features important wildlife corridors and habitat for mule deer and other wildlife species, unique piñon juniper forests and the largest known colony of Gray's townsend daisy, a globally imperiled species.

Because of the land's proximity to U.S. Highway 160, it faces significant development threats, as the property is zoned for ten acre lots. While the family has not subdivided the property, it has received an offer from a third party to buy the property for development as a commercial recreational vehicle park.

For several years, the family has been working to sell the land to the NPS. Because of financial reasons, the family must sell the property this year. Accordingly, we entered into a contract with the family to acquire the tract by the end of the year, contingent upon passage of the legislation and the availability of funding.

By authorizing the NPS to acquire the Henneman property, H.R. 783 provides a solution for the family to conserve its property as part of the Park. This legislation gives the family another option, besides selling the property for development. Because of the short time period to complete the acquisition, we respectfully request that the Congress approve H.R. 783 as soon as possible. Passage of the legislation will allow us to move forward with the project and enable the NPS to acquire the property in the event that Congress appropriates the necessary funding.

We are pleased that the Bush Administration supports this bill and that bipartisan companion legislation, S. 126, has been introduced in the Senate by Senator Wayne Allard and Senator Ken Salazar, and was reported favorably by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee earlier this year.

If enacted, H.R. 783 will provide the public with substantial benefits. It would further the Park's mission to preserve and protect the heritage of ancestral Puebloan peoples along with Mesa Verde's wildlife and other natural resources. In addition, it would provide park visitors with an opportunity to enjoy the scenery on their approach into the Park. Visitors traveling west on U.S. 160 towards the Park can see Point Lookout, one of the Park's most prominent features. Because the Henneman tract is located at the base of Point Lookout, a commercial development would negatively impact the view looking towards the Park.

After entering the Park, visitors proceed on Point Lookout Road to the Mancos Valley Overlook. Over 75 years ago, Congress added lands in this area to the Park “for the purpose of protecting the scenery along the Point Lookout Road.” Thus, H.R. 783 would further a Park purpose to protect the scenery along the road corridor. This legislation would also promote the local economy by ensuring continued opportunities for high quality visitor experiences at the Park.

For over one hundred years, Mesa Verde’s rich cultural history has captured the public’s imagination and generated strong support in Congress and the non-profit community. The discovery of Mesa Verde’s cliff dwellings, in the 1880s, and the ensuing publicity about the loss of priceless archeological treasures prompted local organizations to lead a successful campaign to establish the Park. Soon after Congress passed the Antiquities Act, Congress passed legislation in 1906 to establish Mesa Verde National Park as America’s tenth National Park and the nation’s first Park dedicated to preserving archeological resources.

Building on decades of partnerships with the non-profit sector to preserve the Park’s resources, the Mesa Verde Foundation launched an effort to address a critical need at the Park to better manage the its collection of artifacts and to provide the public with expanded opportunities to learn about the Park’s history and story of Native Americans who lived at Mesa Verde centuries ago and who live in the Four Corners region today.

Several years ago, the Foundation committed to donating a 38 acre tract to the NPS for a new federally-funded collections facility and a new Foundation-funded visitors center at the entrance to the Park. As a result of this commitment, both facilities are currently under design in anticipation of the land donation. The Foundation plans to

donate the land when construction funds for the collections facility are appropriated in future fiscal years. The proposed new visitors center will provide visitors with improved opportunities to learn about Mesa Verde, plan their trip in the Park and purchase tickets for guided tours. Currently, visitor information facilities are located 15 miles inside the Park at the Far View Visitor Center.

Because H.R. 783 would authorize the NPS to accept the donation of the Foundation's land to support the construction of the federal collections facility and visitor center, the bill is a critical step forward in the process to protect the Park's irreplaceable collections and introduce visitors to this magnificent Park.

Mr. Chairman, last year, the NPS and local partners celebrated the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Park. Over 575,000 visitors enjoyed the Park last year. With the Committee's support for this bill, millions more visitors will be able to experience the same sense of awe, respect and wonder that we enjoy today.

H.R. 783 is in keeping with over 100 years of Congressional leadership to pass legislation to conserve Mesa Verde, one of our nation's and the world's richest archeological and cultural treasures. This legislation will set the stage for the next 100 years for Mesa Verde to be at the forefront of our nation's commitment to honor our past by conserving our heritage for future generations.

Mr. Chairman, I would be pleased to answer your questions and provide additional information to you and the Subcommittee.