



NEW BRIDGE
STRATEGY

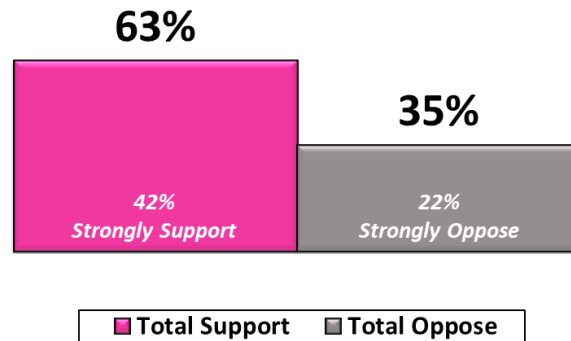
TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Lori Weigel & Kathryn Hahne / New Bridge Strategy
DATE: October 21, 2019
RE: Support for Colorado Wilderness Act in Survey of Western Slope Voters

New Bridge Strategy recently completed a survey of voters throughout western Colorado – an area largely consisting of the Third Congressional District - to determine their views on a range of conservation issues, particularly increasing wilderness designations on some lands in the West.¹ **The study found strong support for the Colorado Wilderness Act to increase wilderness primarily in desert and canyon areas in their region. They also want to keep Wilderness Study Areas intact, rather than removing that designation on some public lands.** This support may be grounded in the fact that voters view public lands as beneficial for the economy. They also anticipate outdoor recreation becoming increasingly important in the region. This is not surprising given that most voters in this region say that they engage in outdoor recreation activities and/or sportsmen activities.

Specifically, the survey found that...

- **More than three-in-five Western Slope voters support “dedicating additional, existing public lands as wilderness areas here in Colorado.”** Fully 63 percent support dedicating more land as wilderness in Colorado after hearing a brief explanation of what this would entail. Respondents were told that “Just over fifty years ago Congress passed the Wilderness Act, which protected the Maroon Bells and the San Juan Mountains here in Colorado. These areas are designated as wilderness in order to keep that land conserved in its natural state. Wilderness lands can be used for hiking, camping, livestock grazing, horseback riding, wildlife watching, hunting and fishing. However, mining, oil and gas development, logging, and the use of motorized or off-road vehicles and mountain bikes are not allowed on wilderness lands.” Again, after hearing this neutral explanation, there is solid support of 63 percent, and fully 42 percent “strongly” support it. Only 35 percent register opposition to this proposal. Support for increasing the amount of wilderness in Colorado is evident throughout the entire district as well.

Dedicating Additional Public Lands as Wilderness

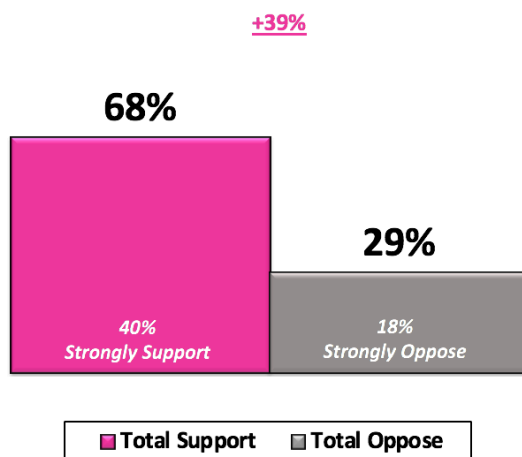


Support for extending wilderness protections has appeal among virtually all sub-groups, including a majority of hunters (55 percent) and anglers (62 percent), and surprisingly, off-road vehicle users (55 percent support, 43 percent oppose). More than two-thirds of every other type of outdoor recreation enthusiast expressed support, including 80 percent of mountain bikers, 75 percent of bird/wildlife watchers, and 73 percent of hikers). A majority across party lines also express support, with near universal support among Democrats (94 percent), and nearly three-in-five Republicans (59 percent) and unaffiliated voters (59 percent) registering support for additional wilderness areas in Colorado.

In addition, once voters know that “just five percent of Colorado lands are currently dedicated as wilderness areas,” support for dedicating additional public lands as wilderness increases to fully 69 percent.

- **Likewise, there is significant support for adding wilderness protections to public lands in desert and canyons regions of the state.** Fully 68 percent express support for a proposal that would “designate as wilderness lands areas that include some desert canyons and mesas, such as lands near Mesa Verde National Park, and natural areas along the Arkansas and Dolores Rivers. These amount to less than 10 percent of the public lands in southern and western Colorado.” Two-in-five (40 percent) strongly support the proposal, while 29 percent oppose it. This proposal engenders majority support across party lines (92 percent of Democrats, 62 percent of unaffiliated voters and 54 percent of Republicans), and with virtually every sub-group examined. It has solid support throughout the district, including in Mesa County (66 percent support).

Views of Colorado Wilderness Act



- **Voters in this region also reject calls to eliminate protections for Wilderness Study Areas.** Western Colorado voters prefer that Congress keep existing public lands in Wilderness Study Areas, rather than removing that designation to those lands by a nearly three to one margin, as the next graph illustrates.

Wilderness Study Areas

In Western Colorado some areas of existing public lands have been protected as Wilderness Study Areas for 40 years, such as the Bookcliffs and the Dolores River Canyon, while Congress decides whether to permanently designate them as wilderness. These public lands are accessible to hunters, anglers, hikers, and others on foot and horse, and allow grazing, but not oil and gas drilling or logging. There are proposals in Congress that would eliminate protections for a half-dozen wilderness study areas in Colorado. That would open 40,000 acres to oil and gas drilling, or other industrial development that is currently off-limits. Which would you prefer Congress do?

Keep the Wilderness Study Areas as they are now and retain those protections

71%

Eliminate protections for all of these Wilderness Study Areas and open them for development

26%

Majorities of all key voter sub-groups prefer that Congress keep the status quo. This includes more than three-in-five Republican and unaffiliated voters in the region (61 percent say to keep the areas as they are, while 34 percent would change their status) and virtually all Democrats (97 percent keep as is). The desire to retain Wilderness Study Areas is evident throughout the region, including in Mesa County (70 percent).

- **Support for these public lands proposals may be grounded in the fact that voters make a connection between their economy and the outdoors.** The overwhelming majority of voters in western Colorado say they presence of public lands in Colorado helps our economy (84 percent) rather than hurts it (6 percent) or has little impact on the economy (8 percent). Majorities of every single sub-group hold the perception that public lands help the economy.

Similarly, the survey demonstrates that voters in this region view the “outdoor economy” as being “very important” to their economic future. Fully 68 percent characterize the outdoor economy which in the survey we defined as “people who come to hunt, fish, camp, hike, see wildlife, as well as those who manufacture and sell equipment for those activities” as being very important to “the economic future of western Colorado.” Another one-in-four (25 percent) say it is “somewhat important,” and a mere 7 percent do not see it as important. Both Democrats (76 percent) and Republicans (70 percent) view the outdoor economy as very important to the economic future of western Colorado.

- **The vast majority of western Coloradans engage in outdoor recreation themselves.** When asked about their own ties to the outdoors, the vast majority of voters here are participating in many activities. Many identify as either a hunter (39%) or an angler (52 percent). More than nine-in-ten say that they regularly participate in some other form of outdoor recreation, with a range of activities identified:

64%	Hiking or trail running
64%	Camping
51%	Bird watching and viewing wildlife
30%	Kayaking, canoeing or boating
36%	Riding an off-road vehicle or snowmobile
36%	Snow shoeing, skiing or boarding
22%	Mountain biking

In fact, a majority say that they regularly participate in three or more of these activities (56 percent).

- In sum, majorities of western Colorado voters want to see additional public lands dedicated as wilderness, both in concept and when specific areas of the state are identified for designation. They prefer the status quo when it comes to Wilderness Study Areas as well. Voters in the region perceive public lands as beneficial to the economy and the outdoor economy as very important to the future of western Colorado. The vast majority participate in recreation activities in the outdoors.

ⁱ **Methodology:** From September 20-26, 2019, New Bridge Strategy completed 400 interviews on landlines, cell phones and via an email invitation to a web-based version of the survey. Interviews were completed among voters likely to participate in the 2020 election who live in the third Congressional district or Fremont and Chafee counties, since some legislative proposals tested affect those counties as well. The sample was distributed proportionally across this region based on number of voters by county. It is also demographically representative of the region's electorate by age, gender, education level and other variables. The sample also is representative based on partisan registration, so for example 32% of respondents are registered as Republicans, 27% as Democrats and 40% are unaffiliated/affiliated with a third party.

The margin of sampling error for the full sample is $\pm 4.9\%$ at the 95% confidence interval; margins of sampling error for population subgroups within the sample will be higher. Due to rounding, not all totals will sum to 100%.