

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contacts: Katie Arberg, Defenders of Wildlife, 202-772-0259, karberg@defenders.org
Christine Canaly, San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council, 719-256-4758, info@slvec.org
John Mellgren, Western Environmental Law Center, 541-359-0990, mellgren@westernlaw.org
Adam Rissien, WildEarth Guardians, 406-370-3147, arissien@wildearthguardians.org

Conservation Groups Unite to Protect Threatened Species in Colorado

Lawsuits filed against the Rio Grande National Forest's New Land Management Plan

Denver, Colo. (November 8, 2021) – Today, Defenders of Wildlife, The Wilderness Society, the San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council, San Juan Citizens Alliance, WildEarth Guardians and the Western Environmental Law Center filed two lawsuits against the United States Forest Service over its newly revised land management plan for the Rio Grande National Forest. Over the past six years, conservation groups provided science-based recommendations and concrete solutions for protecting species and their diverse habitats in the Forest. But in the face of these needed steps, the Forest Service's plan slashes protections for the threatened Canada lynx and the endangered Uncompahgre fritillary butterfly in violation of the Endangered Species Act, National Environmental Policy Act and the Forest Service's own regulations.

The [lawsuit filed](#) by Defenders of Wildlife challenges the rollback of critical protections for lynx habitat in the Rio Grande National Forest. The Canada lynx relies heavily on the Rio Grande National Forest in the Southern Rocky Mountains, which contains more than half the locations in Colorado where lynx are consistently found. But the population is in dire straits, and federal scientists predict that the lynx may disappear from Colorado altogether within a matter of decades. The Forest Service's new plan has now opened the extremely important lynx habitat in the forest to logging, one of the biggest threats to the cat.

"Scientists are saying the Canada lynx population in the Rio Grande National Forest is in the 'emergency room,' but the Forest Service refuses to provide this species with the care it needs," said **Lauren McCain, senior policy analyst for Defenders of Wildlife**. "It's baffling that the Forest Service chose to weaken protections for lynx on the forest. They left us no option but to sue to help recover the species in the Southern Rockies."

The [lawsuit filed](#) by The Wilderness Society, the San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council, San Juan Citizens Alliance, WildEarth Guardians, and the Western Environmental Law Center challenges the forest plan's failure to adequately protect habitat for species including the Uncompahgre fritillary butterfly, or to regulate recreational uses appropriately. The Rio Grande National Forest is also home to five of the 11 colonies of critically endangered Uncompahgre fritillary butterfly. The species can only be found fluttering above 12,000 feet and in just a small area of Colorado. Despite identifying threats to the species, including trampling by humans and livestock and climate change, the Rio Grande's revised forest plan fails to do anything specific to protect this species, much less contribute to its recovery.

In addition, the plan missed a key opportunity to connect important habitat areas so species can move from summer to winter habitat, and to assure that recreation avoids key habitat areas. Both of these factors are crucial to ecological and resource protection.

“This plan encourages a crisis-management response,” said **Christine Canaly, director of the San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council**. “After years of public meeting participation, providing substantive comments and reviewing hundreds of letters from concerned citizens – who clearly support the management of healthy forests, ecosystem services, and protection of critical habitat – the Final Forest Plan instead renders a hands-off approach, abdicating responsibility for providing upfront baseline analysis. Standards and guidelines have been removed, leading to less comprehensive, more reactive decision making.”

“The Rio Grande Revised Forest Plan took a completely wrong turn by omitting protections for a range of imperiled species,” said **Adam Rissien, ReWilding advocate with WildEarth Guardians**. “We were hopeful the Forest Service would have reversed course, but this plan still fails to restore or maintain habitat, not only for Canada lynx, but also the Rio Grande cutthroat trout, river otter, western bumblebee, bighorn sheep and the endangered Uncompahgre fritillary butterfly.”

“The Rio Grande National Forest finalized an incredibly inadequate plan that fails to protect the values of the forest we all know and love, like important wildlife habitat and opportunities for people and families to enjoy our shared public lands,” says **Jim Ramey, Colorado state director for The Wilderness Society**. “Unfortunately, the Forest Service ignored years of community input and scientific analysis, resulting in a plan that doesn’t work hard enough for us to hand down a healthy forest for future Coloradans. We must hold the Forest Service to a higher standard for protecting critical wildlife corridors like Spruce Hole and Wolf Creek Pass. The Forest Service should prioritize locally-driven, conservation-focused plans to help us meet the national goal to protect 30% of lands and waters by 2030.”

“New Forest Service rules gave Rio Grande National Forest managers the chance to vastly improve how they oversee the many uses of these important public lands,” said **John Mellgren, general counsel at the Western Environmental Law Center**. “Rather than seizing the opportunity to restore ecological integrity to these lands, the Forest Service instead ignored unambiguous requirements for ensuring the sustainability of our national forests.”

The Rio Grande National Forest is a 1.8-million-acre gem in the middle of southern Colorado and includes the headwaters of its namesake river. The forest boasts a diversity of ecosystems from lower-elevation sagebrush and grasslands to the dominant high-elevation spruce-fir forest and fragile alpine areas. Proper management of this expansive area is key to preserving critical habitat and biodiversity in the Southern Rockies and to buffering against the stresses our native wildlife are experiencing from climate change.

“The Rio Grande National Forest incorporates much of Colorado’s most important wildlife habitat, and some of our state’s largest expanses of wild and undeveloped habitat,” said **Mark Pearson, executive director at San Juan Citizens Alliance**. “The public deserves a management plan for the next 20 years that we can count on for protecting the very essence of the Rio Grande National Forest.”