

Testimony to the US House of Representative Committee on Natural Resources on Feb 6, 2018

By Norm Steen, Teller County (CO) Commissioner

In support of HR 835, A Bill to update the map of, and modify the maximum acreage available for inclusion in, the Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Norm Steen, and I am a County Commissioner for Teller County Colorado. I am here to speak in support of HR 835, concerning the Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument, which is located entirely within Teller County.

Allow me to describe for you the area we are considering here today. The Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument is truly a gem. It's currently just under 6,000 acres, or a little more than 9 square miles in size. The Monument protects some of the richest fossil deposits in the world, more than 1500 known species. Those fossils can be found in some of the most prominent natural history museums in the world, with the largest exhibit of perhaps 10,000 specimens located in the Smithsonian Museum of National History just a short distance from here. The Monument is interlaced by 14 miles of hiking trails which lead to massive petrified redwood tree stumps, the largest of which is about 15 feet in diameter, as well as beautiful Colorado scenery, including views of the 14,000 foot summit of Pikes Peak less than 15 miles away. The nearby un-incorporated town of Florissant was named by early settlers for Florissant Missouri, and was built in a mountain valley famous for its profuse wildflowers in 1870. Wildflowers continue to grow there today, especially in late springtime.

Inside the Monument visitor center can be found fossilized exhibits of tiny flowers, insects, seeds and small animals, with the smallest being fossilized plant pollen, about 20 microns (20 thousandths of a millimeter) across. The Monument sits at an elevation of over 8,000 feet and is an excellent site for viewing herds of hundreds of wild elk and night star gazing. The Monument is easily accessed off US Hwy 24 down a paved County road, and is visited by more than 70,000 guests each year, including groups of school children, scout groups, and families with children. On one of those student visits in 2013, a 4th grade girl was dissecting a layer of shale rock and discovered a species of bird never before seen. Her discovery was named for her, now known as the "Gabby Bird". It is also a center for serious researchers including those from five area colleges and universities, who will find fossils unlike those found anywhere else in the world. It is the only unit of the National Park Service in the Pikes Peak region of Colorado.

In addition to the professional federal staff, local volunteers organized as the Friends of the Fossil Beds serve as volunteers and help raise more than \$20,000 a year to help pay for such things as student internships, and bus rental fees to bring school children to the Monument.

In short, the Fossil Beds Monument is both a local and national treasure, fully embraced, supported, and enjoyed by our Colorado residents and by tens of thousands of visitors from around the world each year. The Monument has an estimated annual economic benefit to the region of over \$6 million.

So in this context, about 2-1/2 years ago, the current Superintendent of the Fossil Beds, Ms. Michelle Wheatley, informed the Teller County Board of Commissioners that she had been approached by a private individual who owned land adjoining the Fossil Beds, and who had proposed donating his private land to the Fossil Beds for public enjoyment. Together we reviewed maps of the proposed change, considered its impacts to our County and our residents, and sought public comment on the proposed expansion. I have provided three examples of the materials used during those meetings for your consideration. We received no public opposition to the idea, and we unanimously agreed to support the expansion of the Fossil Beds Monument. I believe you have a copy of that letter of support.

This proposed map expansion of 300 acres will provide critical access to the Monument's western boundary for wildland fire protection and opportunities for completing hazardous fuel mitigation projects, provide a natural buffer from surrounding developed areas, as well as provide additional wildlife habitat to the Monument.

The entire process which brought us to our hearing today was collaborative, transparent, and was done in the interest of what best serves the residents of our County, and the tens of thousands of guests who travel to Teller County each year to visit the Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument.

Mr. Chairman, on behalf Teller County governance, I am pleased to support HR 835, and to urge the Committee's favorable consideration. Thank you.