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**Testimony Before the
Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
United States House of Representatives**

**Hearing on H.R. 2016, the National Landscape Conservation System Act
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands on H.R. 2016, the National Landscape Conservation System Act. I am Bill Meadows, President of The Wilderness Society. Since 1935, The Wilderness Society has worked to ensure that future generations will enjoy, as we do today, the clean air and water, wildlife, beauty and opportunities for recreation and renewal that pristine forests, rivers, deserts and mountains provide. We represent a quarter of a million Americans throughout the country who are investing in their legacy of wild places. We welcome the opportunity to comment on the historic importance of the National Landscape Conservation System Act.

The National Landscape Conservation System is a public lands system like no other. It is composed of BLM-managed lands and waters designated for conservation by Congress or the President, including National Conservation Areas and Wild and Scenic Rivers, as well as National Monuments, wilderness areas and other special places. These landscapes with innumerable natural and cultural resource values ensure invaluable educational and recreational opportunities for current and future generations. The Conservation System provides unique opportunities for solitude and adventure where visitors can create their own experiences. While constituting only 10% of BLM lands and waters, the System accommodates a third of BLM's recreation use. The System facilitates diverse recreational and educational experiences, such as famed rafting in California's North Fork of the American River, exploring how ancient cultures lived on the landscape in Arizona's Agua Fria National Monument, hiking on the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, mountain biking in Colorado's McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area, and backpacking and wildlife viewing opportunities in the System's many wilderness areas.

Protected areas such as National Conservation Areas and wilderness areas offer many economic benefits to neighboring communities. Because Conservation System visitor centers are designed to be located in gateway communities, the landscapes within the System remain protected and surrounding communities receive the economic benefits of increased visitation to these wonderful places. The System also provides outstanding opportunities for research and outdoor education. BLM staff have shared with us their excitement about the many research projects that Conservation System lands offer. The System is also well known for its cultural resources, including those in Canyons of the

Ancients National Monument, which contains the largest concentration of known archaeological sites in the nation.

The BLM's Conservation System also encompasses important wildlife habitat, allowing for wildlife to thrive in healthy ecosystems. Conservation System lands and waters provide habitat for many threatened and endangered species as well. For example, while constituting only 10% of BLM lands, the Conservation System protects 30% of suitable desert tortoise habitat on BLM land, 73% of Peninsular Bighorn Sheep Critical Habitat on BLM lands, and 54% of the California Condor range on BLM lands.

We think it critical for Congress to acknowledge the importance of these lands and waters. This legislation will ensure that the natural and cultural resources for which these magnificent places were designated will be preserved in perpetuity for the American people to discover and appreciate.

A diversity of Americans has shown support for these places, and numerous organizations have spoken out to demonstrate this support. The Wilderness Society has enjoyed being a leader in the Conservation System Alliance, a coalition of more than fifty conservation, historic preservation, faith-based, recreation and business groups. These groups represent millions of Americans nationwide and together, have been working nationally and within local communities to foster stewardship of the Conservation System.

Seven years ago this month, the Interior Department administratively designated this unique system of public lands. I was excited that the BLM was tasked with ensuring that the crown jewels under their management, their most outstanding lands and waters, would be managed as a system for conservation purposes. We are delighted today that the Congress has the foresight to ensure permanent protection for these landscapes through straightforward legislation that will simply give the System the permanent authorization it deserves.

I again want to thank the committee for discussing this important legislation and look forward to working with Congress to marshal the bill towards passage. Please be sure to let me know if you need additional information that could be of assistance. Thank you again for your foresight in discussing this legislation, and for the opportunity to testify before the committee.