



**BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
ARCHULETA COUNTY, COLORADO**

P.O. Box 1507 / 398 Lewis Street / Pagosa Springs, Colorado 81147
Tel (970) 264-8300

September 7, 2021

Ms. Kara Chadwick, Forest Supervisor
USDA Forest Service, San Juan National Forest
15 Burnett Court
Durango, CO 81301

RE: V Rock Land & Water Conservation Fund Acquisition

Dear Ms. Chadwick,

The Archuleta County Board of County Commissioners supports the San Juan National Forest's (SJNF) request for fiscal year (FY) 2023 funding through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) to acquire the V Rock property southeast of Pagosa Springs, Colorado. Development of the property, and the associated year-round access, would further fragment the lower elevation wildlife habitat in and around the area.

We understand that the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) is working with the landowner on an option contract to hold the property until the SJNF has sufficient funds to acquire it. As a nonprofit wildlife conservation organization, RMEF's mission is to *ensure the future of elk, other wildlife, their habitat and our hunting heritage*. Founded more than 37 years ago, fueled by hunters and a membership of more than 231,000 strong, RMEF has conserved more than 8.1 million acres for elk and other wildlife.

The V Rock property is a 160-acre inholding surrounded by SJNF lands. It is the only private property accessed off of National Forest System Road 663 (Buckles Lake Road). The property provides habitat for a diversity of wildlife species, including resident and migratory birds, coyote, mountain lion, black bear, elk and mule deer. It is located in a critical migration corridor for elk and mule deer migrating from the San Juan Mountains to and from lower elevation winter ranges on the SJNF, Southern Ute Indian Reservation, Jicarilla Apache Reservation, and private lands. The property is also an elk winter range. Long-term protection will maintain the quality wildlife habitat on the property and adjacent SJNF lands.

The surrounding SJNF lands attract many resident and non-resident hunters, including those pursuing small game species (coyote, dusky grouse and cottontail), big game species (elk, mule deer and black bear), and Merriam's turkey. Hunting is a major

economic driver for Pagosa Springs and surrounding communities in southwest Colorado. The area is also a very popular destination for public viewing of fall colors.

The V Rock property is within the Rio Chama Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) area which covers four national forests in two states and the headwaters of three river basins. The goals and objectives of the Rio Chama CFLRP include reducing the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire, restoring natural fire regimes, increasing forest diversity and old growth characteristics, improving fish and wildlife habitat and connectivity, improving water quality and watershed function, and mitigating climate change impacts. Acquisition of the V Rock property will enhance these goals by facilitating comprehensive vegetation management treatments across the property and surrounding SJNF lands that will make the entire landscape more resilient to disturbance brought about by climate change.

The year-round local and regional economies in southwest Colorado depend on these public land resources and the maintenance of pristine, non-developed, and non-industrial backcountry access. Our way of life is interwoven with respecting our ranching and logging heritage while at the same time being proud of the hard work our communities and nation have done to honor and protect these unique natural amenities. We support the completion of the V Rock acquisition so this property will become public and managed as part of the San Juan National Forest for all the public and wildlife habitat benefits it can provide.

Sincerely yours,

Alvin Schaaf
Chairman,
Board of County Commissioners