

Dear representatives and elected officials,

As a citizen of Montezuma County, a user of the San Juan National Forest (SJNF), and a supporter of the Mancos Trails Group, I am writing to bring to your attention to an issue regarding the federal public lands under the jurisdiction of the SJNF that has negatively affected our community and could potentially curtail or cut-off access to this area in the future.

In October of 2024, the so-called *free land holder committee*, led by Patrick Pipkin and bearing many hallmarks of the sovereign citizen movement, claimed to have ownership of approximately 1,460 acres of federal public lands. This group illegally surveyed, cleared, and installed approximately four miles of barb wire fence line in the Chicken Creek Area of the Dolores Ranger District of the San Juan National Forest north of Mancos, Colorado in Montezuma County. They felled trees and created roads in previously pristine forest. This area has been under the ownership and management of the United States Forest Service (USFS) since 1927, and used for legal cattle grazing, hunting (CPW Unit 73), recreational activities, and wildlife habitat.

There are active grazing leases and ditch maintenance easements in the area as well as miles of multi-use trails maintained by the sweat of local volunteer organizations partnered with USFS and monetary donations from local businesses and residents. The *free land holder committee* has stated in writing that they would revoke federal grazing allotments on that property, which is contrary to legal contracts with the USFS.

We are aware that the United States Forest Service is actively attempting to resolve these illegal actions through the legal process. We hope that this will result in appropriate legal repercussions for the perpetrators of both the damage to our public land and this egregious and illegal attempted land grab. The entire community has been impacted; due to safety concerns the public school has canceled use of the area, recreational users feel unsafe, and grazing allotment holders have been negatively impacted.

The Mancos Trails Group (www.mancostrails.org) is a local, volunteer-led organization, based in Mancos, CO. This group has a long-standing partnership with the US Forest Service to build and maintain trails in the Chicken Creek Area for outdoor recreation use, including biking, hiking, and horseback riding. Volunteers with the Mancos Trails Group have donated hundreds of hours of time over the past several years in these endeavors.

I request that the U.S. Congress, in its oversight capacity, monitor this issue to ensure that the US Forest Service upholds its responsibility to protect the current boundaries of the San Juan National Forest, enforce all laws governing use and activities in the San Juan National Forest, and bring legal repercussions to the *free land holder committee* for their illegal installation of the fence line and damages to public lands.

Respectfully,