January 26, 2022

The Honorable Tom Vilsack, Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20250

RE: Request to Block Forest Service Right of Way That Will Undermine President Biden’s Climate Goals

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

The undersigned groups representing millions of supporters working to protect our climate, national forests, and communities from the climate emergency request that you stop the United States Forest Service’s plan to approve a right-of-way through the Ashley National Forest that
would enable construction of the proposed Uinta Basin Railway resulting in a quadrupling of fossil fuel extraction in the Uinta Basin and degrading a National Forest roadless area. The Forest Service deadline for resolving our objections to the draft record of decision is March 5, 2022.

This new railway and the oil trains it will facilitate, will cause 53 million tons of carbon pollution a year to be emitted into the atmosphere, equal to six dirty coal plants, and otherwise do tremendous harm to the environment, including increasing the risk of oil train and climate driven wildfires.

The stated purpose of the railway and the financial basis for it, is to quadruple fossil fuel extraction in Utah’s Uinta Basin from the current level of 80,000 barrels per day, to 350,000 barrels per day. Further, because the proposed rail line is intended to transport crude oil to Gulf Coast refineries, the project will adversely affect disproportionately impacted communities already exposed to particularly elevated levels of air and water pollution.

Many of the undersigned organizations have communicated our concerns to the United States Forest Service prior to issuing draft approval of the right of way, including to the Ashley National Forest Supervisor, and Forest Service Chief Randy Moore.

We were astonished by Chief Moore’s response letter to us in support of the project that characterized the railway as comporting with President Biden’s Executive Order 14008 concerning the climate crisis. Specifically Chief Moore wrote that: “The Forest Supervisor determined the proposed use of the project is in the public interest and supports President Joseph R. Biden’s policies outlined in Executive Order 14008 to rebuild our infrastructure for a sustainable economy.”

Chief Moore is incorrect—the Uinta Basin Railway directly conflicts with the President’s order.

Executive Order 14008, “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad” sets as U.S. policy the goal of “significant short-term reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and net-zero global emissions by mid-century or before.” To that end, President Biden has set a goal to reduce U.S. emissions by 50-52% from 2005 levels by 2030, just eight years away. Section 213 of E.O. 14008 further states that the administration “shall take steps, consistent with applicable law, to ensure that Federal infrastructure investment reduces climate pollution, and to require that Federal permitting decisions consider the effects of greenhouse gas emissions and climate change.” And, section 201, of E.O. 14008, further states that “It is the policy of my Administration to organize and deploy the full capacity of its agencies to combat the climate crisis to implement a Government –wide approach that reduces climate pollution in every sector of the economy...).
Contrary to E.O. 14008, the intended purpose and stated goal of the railway is to *increase fossil fuel extraction on public lands in the Uinta Basin*. Increased drilling and extraction the railway seeks to induce will boost greenhouse pollution at every step in the process: from extraction, to transportation, to refining, to combustion. The infrastructure investment solely enabled by the issuance of this discretionary right-of-way thus contradicts the President’s stated climate policy.

In addition to worsening the climate crisis, the railway would cause irreversible environmental damage. According to the environmental analysis that the Forest Service relies on, the Uinta Basin Railway would alter more than 400 Utah streams and strip bare or build on 10,000 acres of wildlife habitat, including areas on Forest Service land designated as “crucial” habitat for bighorn, deer, and elk. In Emma Park, a remote sagebrush valley known to birdwatchers, bulldozers and train traffic would drive imperiled greater sage grouse out of their mating and nesting grounds and, it is feared, wipe them out from the region. Virtually the entirety of the railway on the Ashley National Forest, totaling 12 miles, would be built in an inventoried roadless area protected by the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, and according to the Forest Service, degrade roadless area values by building five bridges and blasting three tunnels up to 2100 feet wide.

The railway will also inflict harm downstream where the trains would be headed through Colorado to Gulf Coast refineries at a time when western states are reeling from drought, wildfires and pollution caused by the climate emergency. Federal documents show that 672 to 1,809 oil trains each carrying approximately 642 barrels of crude oil would leave the Uinta Basin each year. These trains would increase the risk of fires and oil spills along the route through Colorado, including the vulnerable Colorado River corridor. The western slope of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado would likely experience increased ozone pollution resulting from increased fossil fuel production drifting into Colorado from the neighboring Uinta Basin.

The harm from this proposed railway will exacerbate the climate emergency, increase the risk of wildfires and oil spills, put pressure on our already strained rail system and increase pollution while undermining President Biden’s goals to address the climate crisis.

We therefore, respectfully request that you protect the public interest by instructing the Forest Service to reject the proposed right-of-way through the Ashley National Forest.

Sincerely,

Randi Spivak

Micah Parkin

Patricia Hine

Sherry Pollack

Center for Biological Diversity

350 Colorado

350 Eugene

350 Hawaii
Selden Prentice  350 Seattle
Daniel Villa  350 Tacoma
Honorable Jackie Biskupski  35th Mayor of Salt Lake City
Karen Bueno  Accelerate Neighborhood Climate Action
Maayan Cohen  Action for the Climate Emergency (ACE)
Steve Holmer  American Bird Conservancy
Michael Fiebig  American Rivers
Kestrel Kunz  American Whitewater
Sarah Stewart  Animals Are Sentient Beings, Inc
Bob Hamel  Arkansas River Outfitter Association
Billy Marquis  Arkansas River Tours
Heather Cantino  Athens County's Future Action Network, acfan.org
Marie Venner  Businesses for a Livable Climate
Marie Venner  Call to Action Colorado
Mark Meeks  Capitol Heights Presbyterian
Stefanie Klass  Catholic Network US
Randi Spivak  Center for Biological Diversity
Linda Rudolph  Center for Climate Change and Health
John Stansfield  Central Colorado Wilderness Coalition
Sid Madison  Central Jersey Coalition Against Endless War
Natasha Leger  Citizens for a Healthy Community
Jim Smith  CO Businesses for a Livable Climate
Karen Dils  Collegiate Peaks Chapter Trout Unlimited
Julie Mach  Colorado Mountain Club
Scott Denning  Colorado State University
Fred Kirsch  Community for Sustainable Energy
Luke Schaffer  Conservation Colorado
Clayton Dewey  Democratic Socialists of America
Michael Browning  Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance
Earth Action, Inc.  Earth Action, Inc.
Jane Pargiter  EcoFlight
Kathy Albury  Elders Rising for Intergenerational Justice
Tara Thornton  Endangered Species Coalition
Ellen Montgomery  Environment America
Patrick Kelly-Fischer, Environmental Action
Joan M. Gregory, Environmental Ministry, First Unitarian Church of SLC
Thomas Wheeler, Environmental Protection Information Center
Leah Redwood, Extinction Rebellion San Francisco Bay Area
Ronald J. Martin, Ph.D., Fresnans against Fracking
Michael Kunkel, Friends of Browns Canyon
Jim Miller, Friends of the Bitterroot
Debbie Bruell, Garfield County Democratic Party
Shelley Silbert, Great Old Broads for Wilderness
Bradley Angel, Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice
Alex Veilleux, HEAL Utah
Matt Reed, High Country Conservation Advocates
Matt Holloway, Holloway Educational Resources
Cheryl Barnds, Honor The Earth
Rachael Lehman, I-70 Citizens Advisory Group
Philip Beck, Indivisible Ambassadors
Elizabeta Stacishin, Indivisible Colorado
Jennifer Mamola, John Muir Project
Marie Claire Egbert, John Muir Project of Earth Island Institute
Debbie Thornburg James, Mayfair Park Neighborhood Association Board
Amy Petré Hill, Mental Health & Inclusion Ministries
Nic Venner, Metro State University, Our Children's Trust Juliana case
Emmett Hobley, Montbello Neighborhood Improvement Association
Marc Coles-Ritchie, Mormon Environmental Stewardship Alliance
Rene Voss, Natural Resources Law
Oscar Simpson, New Mexico Sportsmen
Margaret Rossoff, No Coal in Oakland
Jerry Rivers, North American Climate, Conservation and Environment
Kristi Douglas, North Range Concerned Citizens
Judy Lord, Peaceful Uprising
Cheryl Barnds, RapidShift Network
Oscar Simpson, Rio Grande Indivisible, NM
Roz McClellan, Rocky Mountain Recreation Initiative
Alison Gallensky, Rocky Mountain Wild
Christine Canaly               San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council
Jeff Hart                     Save EPA
Dick Cumiskey                Sevier Citizens for Clean Air & Water
Rebekah Ashley               Sierra Club Utah Chapter
Marie Venner                 Small Business Alliance
Nathan Taft                   Stand.earth
Zack Porter                   Standing Trees
Jean Tepperman               Sunflower Alliance
Maura Stephens               System Change Not Climate Change
Tim Duda                      Terra Advocati
Harmony Cummings             The Green House Connection Center
Ruth E. Kastner              The Quantum Institute
Fran Aguirre & Deb James     Unite North Metro Denver
Tony Frates                  Utah Native Plant Society
Jonny Vasic                   Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment
Raphael Cordray              Utah Tar Sands Resistance
Paddy McClelland             Wall of Women
Daniel E. Estrin             Waterkeeper Alliance
Susan Jane Brown             Western Environmental Law Center
Joro Walker                   Western Resource Advocates
Chris Calwell                Western Slope Businesses for a Livable Climate
John Sztukowski              Wild Connections
Jeremy Nichols               WildEarth Guardians
Juli Slivka                   Wilderness Workshop
Katherine Quaid               Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN)
Renée M. Chacon               Womxn from the Mountain

Cc:
Senator John Hickenlooper
Senator Michael Bennet
Representative Joe Neguse
Representative Diana DeGette
Randy Moore, Chief, US Forest Service
Sean Babbington, USDA Senior Climate Advisor
Meryl Harrell, Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment Gina McCarthy,
David Hayes, Special Assistant to the President for Climate Policy
Gina McCarthy, White House National Climate Advisor
Tracy Stone-Manning, Director, Bureau of Land Management