

The Denver Post

## EDITORIAL

### Carving up our wild lands

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Gov. Bill Owens' administration wants to let county governments build roads through national parks, wildlife refuges and wilderness areas. If the U.S. Department of the Interior accepts the plan, Colorado will embrace the most radical and environmentally harmful roads policy of any Western state.

The issue involves efforts to end disputes over an 1866 federal law called **RS 2477**, which let counties claim rights to highways constructed across federal land. A 1976 law superceded **RS 2477**, but some counties still pretend primitive dirt tracks qualify as highways - and that the federal land such tracks cross should revert to local control.

In Utah, Gov. Mike Leavitt proposed a compromise that would let the state claim actual roads that lead to facilities, like telecommunications towers, but not claim rights to dirt tracks leading nowhere. Sadly, his Colorado counterpart didn't match that level of compromise.

Greg Walcher, director of Colorado's Department of Natural Resources, recently has told U.S. Interior Secretary Gale Norton that Colorado and its counties want rights to build roads and encourage motorized traffic on thousands of miles of dirt tracks through federal land. Not even wilderness areas, wildlife refuges, national parks or monuments would off-limits to bulldozers.

Walcher and Owens also want Norton to ignore the 1866 law's clear language requiring that "highways" be "constructed" to link "communities." In essence, they'd substitute counties' definitions of "roads" for the federal definition. But while Owens wants the counties to set the rules, he also wants federal taxpayers to cover the roads' costs.

They also claim it's impossible to build real roads in parts of Colorado - a falsehood that denies our state's remarkable history.

Owens and Walcher should stroll into the state Senate chambers and look at the stained glass portrait of Otto Mears, the 19th century Coloradan who constructed hundreds of miles of toll roads and railroads through some of the West's most rugged terrain. He's the best known of Colorado's great builders, but he wasn't alone.

The pressure to rip open Colorado's pristine lands comes mostly from Moffat County. But Moffat County didn't exist independently of Routt County until 1911. By then, Colorado was developing extensive highways. So if Owens wants the feds to base road decisions on conditions as they existed in 1866, as Walcher's letter implies, they could chose to just ignore Moffat County's demands.

Moffat leaders seem to think the pretense that dirt tracks are highways can stop Congress from declaring any new wilderness areas - or even from protecting the existing Dinosaur National Monument or Brown's Park National Wildlife Refuge.

It's shameful that Gov. Owens is willing to sacrifice Colorado's wildlife, wilderness and national parks to the wishes of a handful of provincial radicals.

**Memo:** Corrections RAN 6/6/03: Because of a reporting error, the June 4 editorial "Carving Up Our Wild Lands" misstated language from the 1866 law at the heart of a dispute about what roads across federal lands should be county highways. The editorial mistakenly said the law requires that, to be built on federal land, "highways" must link communities. It does not. The concept that highways must link communities comes from a June 2002 federal appeals court case in which the U.S. Department of the Interior said, among other things, that "highways open communication from one city or town to another."