

Get Wild: Alphabet soup?

Frank Lilly



Holy Cross Wilderness is pictured in summer 2022.

Krista Hughes/Get Wild

Our federal government includes a myriad of agencies and offices administering a wide array of rules and benefits. Of the 15 Cabinet-level departments, two — the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Department of the Interior (DOI) — are responsible for administering vast tracts of government-owned land (that is, public land owned jointly by you and me). In fact, much of our most-beloved lands in Summit County are public lands administered by our federal government.

One of the largest land management agencies, and the largest landholder in Summit County, is the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). Did you know that the USFS is a subdivision of the USDA? So, why would the Forest Service be a branch of the Department of Agriculture? It's because the mission of the Forest Service is to manage lands for "multiple use," including logging and mining, as well as nonconsumptive uses such as recreation and wildlife habitat. The USFS manages 154 national forests and 20 national grasslands.

There are three other federal land-management agencies, all of which are part of the Department of the Interior. The largest of these — even larger than the Forest Service — is the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Many people think of BLM lands as leftover land that no one claimed as homesteads, and were not made part of a national forest. However, the BLM manages 221 wilderness areas, and 29 national monuments, as well as 636 other areas that are part of the National Conservation Lands. These include almost 2,400 wild and scenic rivers and 6,000 miles of national scenic and historic trails.

The BLM is also known for managing lands for resource extraction, such as grazing, mining, and oil and gas extraction. The Department of the

Interior recently proposed a [new plan](#) and nonconsumptive uses.

to better balance the BLM's management between consumptive

The next largest federal land manager is the National Park Service (NPS), whose primary function is to manage our national parks. In addition to all 63 national parks, they also manage most national monuments, as well as other properties with various designations, such as national recreation areas and national scenic trails. The NPS has a dual role of preserving the environmental and historical integrity of the properties, while also providing access for public use and enjoyment. The NPS does not manage for any resource extraction.

While most national monuments are managed by the NPS, some are managed by BLM, a few by the USFS, and a few are jointly managed by two

of the agencies.

Another federal agency that manages land is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). They manage national wildlife refuges, six national monuments and national fish hatcheries.

Congressionally-designated wilderness areas exist within national forests, BLM land, national parks and even wildlife refuges. Of course, two of those are in Summit County: Eagles Nest and Ptarmigan. A wilderness area is managed to “preserve its natural conditions.”

Moving down to the state level, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) manages several types of state-owned public lands. These include state parks, state trust lands (STLs) and state wildlife areas (SWAs). There is an SWA north of Silverthorne, comprised of three separate units.

The Summit County Open Space and Trails (OST) department also manages over 17,300 acres of open space. Some of this land is owned by the county, some is preserved through easements and some managed in partnership with other government agencies, such as the towns.

Hopefully, you are now less confused regarding the various federal, state and local entities that manage your public lands. Just try to remember whether it is the USDA, DOI, USFS, BLM, NPS, USFWS, CPW, STL, SWA or OST!



Frank Lilly

Frank Lilly is a longtime resident of Summit County and a member of the Eagle Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit Counties.