"You won't see us back here for another 15 or 20 years." — Assistant Secretary of the Army Keith Eastin

So, years after the Pentagon's plans to massively expand the Piñon Canyon Maneuver Site in southeastern Colorado became public knowledge, Keith Eastin turned up in Trinidad last month to "open dialogue" with the local community. He was touting the latest in a long line of expansion plans — in this one, the Army has temporarily scaled back its request for 418,000 acres of our native grasslands to "just" 100,000 acres and apparently believes it has a willing seller for nearly all of that despite a funding ban.

Judging by the commentary from some politicians and media outlets, we are meant to accept this as a fair compromise that should be allowed to proceed unhindered — as if no harm could possibly come of this.

Those commentators will no doubt feign astonishment when they discover that when we said "not one more acre," we meant it. So did every member of the diverse alliance of groups fighting expansion, all the southern Colorado county commissioners and state and federal representatives who have clearly voiced their opposition, and especially those in Congress who voted overwhelmingly to block funding for all aspects of the Pentagon's plans.

In mid-August, the House of Representatives voted 409-4 to continue that funding ban for another year. There is nothing unclear about that.

There are many reasons why the expansion plan should never happen. The environmental consequences for this fragile ecosystem and the rare wildlife it supports would be catastrophic. Ranchers whose relationships with the native grasslands go back many generations would lose our lands and our livelihoods. The region's ranching- and agriculture- based economy and the communities that depend upon it would be devastated. And a vast trove of historical, archaeological and paleontological treasures would be lost.

But there are also good reasons why the Pentagon's pursuit of expansion should be ended permanently. The people of southeastern Colorado have been living under a heavy black cloud for years now. Ever since a map leaked to the public in 2006 showed an 18-year acquisition plan by the Army covering millions of acres, it has been impossible to buy or sell land, or even to invest in what you have, with any level of confidence. The Army's actions have eliminated the free market and partially paralyzed our economy. And we want it back.

What we don't want is the vision of a militarized economy being offered by the Pentagon, one in which we become increasingly dependent on the government and are eventually co-opted into the demise of our family agriculture-based economy.

Eastin has said that 100,000 acres will do for now, and that the government won't be back for more land for "15 or 20 years." He says that as if it should be comforting. Yet the Army is simply taking what it thinks it can get away with as a toehold until it can better manage the politicians and backroom boys. And you have to wonder how Eastin can even speak about a multiyear process when he has acknowledged he is unlikely to remain in the job after January and cannot speak for his successor.

Perhaps we are supposed to appreciate Eastin's honesty: When the PCMS was created, the Army promised it would never come back for more land; now, the Army is promising that it will. But 15 years is hardly never. It's how long it takes for your child to grow up with expectations of continuing a family tradition of working with and caring for the grasslands of southeastern Colorado.

Contrary to some of the recent commentary, we don't need more engagement with the Army on this issue. The Pentagon has demonstrated a very limited understanding of democracy and of the fact that it exists to serve the people and not the other way around.

The people's campaign for No Expansion/No Money for Expansion has won the day in Congress with the funding ban — authored by Republican U.S. Rep. Marilyn Musgrave and co-sponsored by Democratic U.S. Rep. John Salazar — for any aspect of the expansion of the size or boundaries at Piñon Canyon. In America, it is still a government of, by and for the people.

Mack Louden, a board member of Not One More Acre, lives in Branson with his wife, Toyleen. Other signatories were the Marvin Davis family; Maria and Kennie Gyurman; Sue and Frank Menegatti; Penni and Herman Moltrer; Annette and Tim Roberts; Dee and Stan White; and Betty Williams.