



Unified front for Columbine-Hondo area

Wilderness seekers, cyclists back proposed legislation for preservation

By Matthew van Buren

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Residents and officials from around Taos County gathered Tuesday (April 10) to celebrate a proposal that would give full-fledged wilderness protection to the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area while also creating new cycling opportunities nearby.

The Columbine-Hondo, which sits between the Latir and Wheeler Peak wildernesses and includes Lobo Peak, Gold Hill and Flag Mountain, gained "wilderness study area" status three decades ago.

The Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition has been advocating for full wilderness status for the area in recent years, while the Taos Cycling Coalition has requested bicycle access to some trails in the area. Bicycles and other modes of "mechanical transport" are prohibited in wilderness areas.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, visited Taos, Tuesday in part to announce his intention to introduce legislation this week that would permanently protect the 46,000-acre Columbine Hondo area as wilderness. A ceremony held on Taos Pueblo land just outside Arroyo Seco attracted officials from the Pueblo, Taos County, the Forest Service, land grants, acequia associations and local municipalities and nonprofits.

"We're anxious to move ahead and introduce the bill," Bingaman told the crowd. "It's a great thing for Northern New Mexico to see this happen."

He said he hopes the proposal will become law before he retires at the end of this year, though he said in light of the current divisions in Congress there are no guarantees.

"That's a big order," he said.

Bingaman said by its merits the legislation "clearly should" be approved, and that he and other members of New Mexico's Congressional Delegation intend to "make every effort" to get the law passed.

In a letter supporting the announcement, the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition points to the importance of the area as a watershed, wildlife habitat and a prime spot for recreation such as trout fishing, as well as referring to its local cultural significance.

"Community support for safeguarding the Columbine-Hondo is broad and deep," Peggy Nelson, vice president of the Taos nonprofit Amigos Bravos and a Wilderness Coalition member, is quoted as saying in the release. "Business owners, ranchers, sportsmen, acequia parciantes, mountain bikers, elected officials, conservationists and others have worked together for years to raise awareness about the need to preserve this natural treasure. Water is very precious in this desert state, so protecting the Columbine-Hondo watershed is vital not just for Taos County but for all of New Mexico."

Local wilderness guide and llama-trekking outfitter Stuart Wilde has been an outspoken advocate for wilderness protection.

"Not only will this legislation permanently protect the entire Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area, but it also adds about 1,000 acres to the Wheeler Peak Wilderness, including Middle Fork Lake," he said. "In addition, there are some minor boundary adjustments to the Wheeler Peak Wilderness, which will create a world-class, high-altitude mountain bike ride for cyclists. It's a win-win for everyone."

Members of the Taos Cycling Coalition, who had initially hoped to gain access to about 19 percent of the Columbine-Hondo, including parts of the Bull-of-the-Woods, Long Canyon, Gold Hill and Goose Creek trails, attended Tuesday's celebration and spoke in support of the new miles of trail that would be added under the proposal.

Sean Cassily estimated that 20 new miles of trail would be added, allowing cyclists to ride from Taos Ski Valley to Red River and creating an East Fork to Lost Lake loop. He said the elevation of Lost Lake, about 11,500 feet, is close to that of Long Canyon, but the trail is less steep and would therefore appeal to more cyclists as well as being "a whole lot more sustainable."

He said the addition of the new trails would give visiting cyclists, who often ride the South Boundary Trail and don't know where else to go, an incentive to stay in the Taos area longer.

"Everybody's backing this," he said, saying regional bicycling societies and the International Mountain Bicycling Association are behind the legislation.

Taos Cyclery owner Doug Pickett said he is pleased with it, as well, as it ultimately protects the Columbine-Hondo while giving unexpected and "unprecedented" access to cyclists. He said he hopes the local mountain biking community as a whole is supportive.

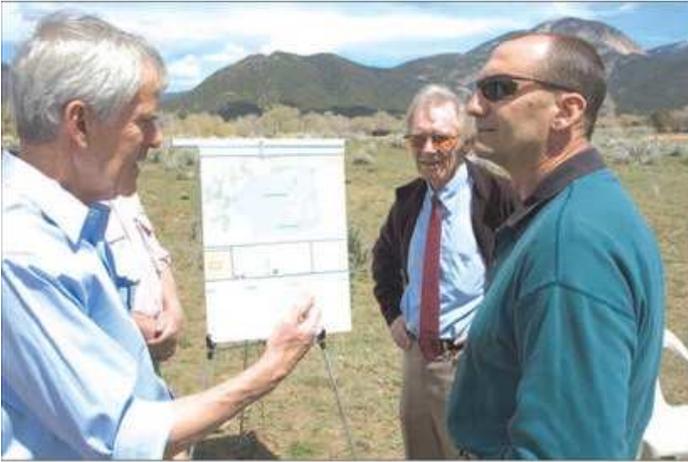
"It's going to be some pretty challenging terrain," he said. "I'm excited about it. I think it would be a big attraction."

Bingaman and other members of the New Mexico Congressional Delegation are also working to create the Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area in Taos and Rio Arriba counties this year. It would include a 236,000-acre conservation area and two smaller wildernesses while protecting traditional uses of the land.

For more information about the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition, visit [www. columbinehondo.org](http://www.columbinehondo.org) .

For more about the Taos Cycling Coalition, visit [www. taoscyclingcoalition.org](http://www.taoscyclingcoalition.org) .

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U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, left, discusses the proposed Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Area with Village of Taos Ski Valley Mayor Neal King, center, and Village of Taos Ski Valley Administrator Mark Fratrack, Tuesday (April 10). Wilderness supporters from throughout Taos County gathered to learn about the legislation Bingaman intends to introduce in the Senate this week.

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