



Sen. Bingaman introduces Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Act

By Matthew van Buren

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U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, has introduced legislation to create the 45,000-acre Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Area.

The Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Act, S. 2468, would grant permanent wilderness protection to the area, located near the Wheeler Peak Wilderness in the Carson National Forest. The Columbine-Hondo was designated a "Wilderness Study Area" in 1980 and managed as a wilderness area since. U.S. Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM, cosponsored the legislation to give the Columbine-Hondo full wilderness status.

"The Columbine-Hondo is one of the last remaining segments of this high alpine ecosystem to receive permanent wilderness protection," Bingaman is quoted as saying in an announcement from his office. "The time has come to permanently protect the Columbine-Hondo. After many years of hard work by local community leaders, a nearly unanimous consensus has formed in support of protecting this landscape as wilderness."

Bingaman and local supporters of the act gathered outside Arroyo Seco, April 10 to view maps of the area and commemorate the legislation's forthcoming introduction. The Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition has been advocating for the protection of the area in its entirety. The Taos Cycling Coalition wanted access to about 19 percent of the Columbine-Hondo for mountain biking, which is not allowed in wilderness areas.

Though the Cycling Coalition's initial request did not make it into the legislation that was introduced, and trails like Long Canyon will remain closed to bicycles, the Bingaman's Act does contain some concessions for cyclists. Besides giving wilderness protection to the 45,000-acre Columbine-Hondo area, the Act proposes changes to the boundary of Wheeler Peak Wilderness. It would add about 1,000 acres to that area "while modifying a boundary that will create a loop trail accessible by mountain bikes along the Lost Lake trail from Taos Ski Valley to the East Fork trail to Red River," according to information from Bingaman's office. Members of the Taos Cycling Coalition have praised the legislation, as has the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA).

"IMBA and several cycling groups in New Mexico are pleased to announce their support for this bill," a release from IMBA states. "Local cycling organizations backing the proposal include the Taos Cycling Coalition, Santa Fe Fat Tire Society, Friends of the Outdoors, Velo De Animas Bicycle Club and the Bicycle Coalition of New Mexico."

According to information from the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition, the act also enjoys the support of local ranchers, sportsmen, Taos Pueblo and others. Supporters have largely touted protecting the area from development for environmental, recreational and economic reasons.

The bill has been referred to the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, which Bingaman chairs. In his address to the committee, Bingaman said it has been uncommon to find such “overwhelming support” for the creation of a new wilderness area.

“I commend the dedication and perseverance exhibited by the many local wilderness advocates who have devoted so many years to see this effort come to fruition,” he said, according to a transcript of the hearing. “Without their help, it may have taken another decade before Congress addressed this long outstanding matter.”

The bill would also transfer National Forest land beneath the town of Red River’s wastewater treatment plant, cemetery and public park and the village of Taos Ski Valley’s wastewater treatment plant to those respective municipalities.

Bingaman has also introduced legislation to create the R’o Grande del Norte National Conservation Area, which would comprise a 236,000-acre conservation area and two wildernesses around San Antonio and Ute mountains. He has said, considering the current divisiveness in Congress, passing the bills could be difficult, but he hopes to see the areas protected this year — his last in Congress before he retires.

For more information about the Wilderness Coalition, visit

www.columbinehondo.org.

For more about the Cycling Coalition, visit *www.taoscyclingcoalition.org*.