

United for wilderness protection

Udall, Heinrich and Luján meet Taos coalition

By Matthew van Buren

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Two U.S. senators and a congressman visited Arroyo Seco last weekend to discuss the permanent protection of public lands in Taos County.

During their Saturday (Feb. 16) visit, Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich and Rep. Ben Ray Luján, all Democrats from New Mexico, heard from those who would like to see full wilderness protection for the 46,000-acre Columbine-Hondo area north of Taos. Several dozen wilderness supporters, including elected officials, business owners and nonprofit representatives, gathered at the Rivers and Birds offices in Arroyo Seco to hear legislative updates and urge federal action to protect the Columbine-Hondo.

The Columbine-Hondo was designated a Wilderness Study Area three decades ago. Last year, then-Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, introduced legislation to bring full wilderness protection to the area, but it did not pass. Michael Casaus, state director for the Wilderness Society, said the 112th Congress was the first in decades not to protect a single acre of wilderness.

Questa Mayor Esther Garcia said village residents respect public lands as communal property, and she supports the creation of the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness as a way to protect watersheds and traditional uses of the land. Taos Town Councilor Andrew Gonzales described the Columbine-Hondo as a “major watershed” with historical, cultural and economic significance.

Rafting guide Cisco Guevara said a wilderness designation would help stimulate business in the area, and he said water from the Columbine-Hondo is “essential for summer river levels.” Outfitter Stuart Wilde said his clients come to Taos County for “solitude and natural beauty,” which they find in the Columbine-Hondo and R’o Grande Gorge.

“Conservation is good for business here in Northern New Mexico,” he said.

Grazing permittee Erminio Martinez said his grandfather grazed cattle in the Columbine-Hondo before New Mexico gained statehood, and Martinez continues the tradition. He urged the dignitaries to protect the area from mining and timber threats while preserving traditional uses.

“My family has a long history in the Columbine-Hondo,” he said. “It is a beautiful piece of this planet.”

David Argüello, president of the Arroyo Hondo Arriba Land Grant, thanked the delegation for its support, saying he has a “historical attachment and family anchors” to the Columbine Hondo. He said his ancestors raised livestock, collected medicinal plants and gathered firewood from the area. Argüello spoke to the area’s importance as a watershed and irrigation source and said wilderness protection would be the best way to protect the area for the good of land grant heirs.

“Restorative justice is social justice and justice for all,” Argüello said.

Udall said those gathered made a “tremendously compelling case” for a wilderness designation for the Columbine-Hondo. He asked whether the form of the legislation introduced in 2012 was still acceptable to everyone, and no one objected.

The bill Bingaman introduced last year included concessions for mountain bikers and land conveyances to the villages of Red River and Taos Ski Valley. Taos Ski Valley would receive 4.6 acres of National Forest System land for the municipality’s wastewater treatment plant; Red River would receive four parcels on which to locate a wastewater treatment plant, a cemetery, a public park and a public road.

Taos Ski Valley administrator Mark Fratrack said the legislation is of the “utmost importance” to the village, both for the economic benefits a wilderness area and new mountain bike trails would bring, as well as for the conveyance, which would allow the village to seek funding for its much-needed treatment plant. Red River Mayor Linda Calhoun said the mountains surrounding Red River are essential to the viability of businesses there. She said being surrounded by National Forest land can also restrict future growth, however, and the land conveyances are important for municipal needs.

Heinrich said as an outfitter/ guide he used to bring groups to raft and backpack in Taos County every summer. He referred to the Columbine-Hondo as “one of the best kept secrets in the Southern Rockies.”

“To be a part of this is really quite special to me,” he said.

He said he is hopeful for an omnibus lands bill that would include the Columbine-Hondo during this session of Congress, though he referred to Washington, D.C., “gridlock” as the effort’s “worst enemy.”

“With this group, there’s nothing we can’t get done,” Heinrich said to those gathered.

The 236,000-acre Rio Grande del Norte area was also the subject of some discussion during the delegation’s visit. Legislation Bingaman introduced last year to create a National Conservation Area, including two wildernesses, did not pass, and entreaties to President Obama to create a National Monument around the area were also unsuccessful. The legislation was reintroduced earlier this month.

Heinrich also said he had a conversation with the president about two weeks ago about protecting the Rio Grande del Norte and came away from it “very, very positive and optimistic.”

For more information about the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition, visit www.columbinehondo.org. For more information about the Rio Grande del Norte, visit www.rio-grande-del-norte.org.



those who would like to see full - dozen - wilderness - connect.
Tina Larkin
Tina Larkin

U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, left, and U.S. Rep. Ben Ray Luján, right, look on as U.S. Sen. Tom Udall compliments the work done by the Columbine-Hondo Coalition and stresses further participation is needed to move a new bill to protect the Rio Grande del Norte at a meeting Saturday (Feb. 16) at Rivers and Birds in Arroyo Seco.