



Earth Day bill filed for Columbine-Hondo

By Matthew van Buren

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Wilderness advocates had significant reason to celebrate this Earth Day (April 22), as another attempt to give the Columbine-Hondo full wilderness designation was introduced in Congress.

U.S. Sens. Tom Udall, D-NM, and Martin Heinrich, D-NM, introduced legislation in the Senate to create the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Area. U.S. Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-NM, introduced companion legislation in the House.

The 45,000-acre Columbine-Hondo sits northwest of Taos, bordered by State Road 522 to the west, State Road 38 between Questa and Red River to the north, and State Road 150 to Taos Ski Valley to the south. Elevations in the area range from less than 8,000 feet to about 12,700 feet at the peak of Gold Hill.

The Columbine-Hondo contains varied plants and wildlife: Hikers and riders encounter trees from Ponderosa and bristlecone pine to aspen, fir and spruce; bighorn sheep, black bear, elk, deer, pine marten, mountain lions and the R'o Grande cutthroat trout are among the animal species that inhabit the area.

The Columbine-Hondo has been managed as a Wilderness Study Area since 1980.

Retired U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman introduced similar wilderness legislation last year, though the 112th Congress did not vote on it. Local businesses, nonprofit organizations, conservationists, schools, land grant organizations and governmental entities have lent their support to the effort to give the Columbine-Hondo the permanence and prominence a full wilderness designation would bring.

“For more than 30 years we have considered the Columbine-Hondo’s economic, recreational and scenic values for protection,” Udall is quoted as saying in a release from the Congressional delegation. “And Taos County locals resoundingly agree that this area is deserving of permanent wilderness status. Designating the Columbine-Hondo as wilderness will only increase profitable tourism opportunities and provide for continued traditional land uses, such as hunting and grazing.”

Luján described protecting the Columbine-Hondo as a “top priority” for the people in and around Taos.

“Permanent wilderness status will ensure that this precious land will be preserved and continue to attract visitors from far and wide to enjoy all that it has to offer,” he is quoted as saying.

“Ensuring that recreation and existing uses continue will benefit all those whose livelihoods depend on the land while creating additional economic opportunities for local businesses.”

Udall, Heinrich and Luján traveled to Arroyo Seco Feb. 16, when they visited with several dozen wilderness supporters and discussed the form the legislation should take.

Besides conferring full wilderness status on the Columbine-Hondo, the Wilderness Act contains boundary modifications and land conveyances meant to mollify a variety of groups, including the municipalities of Red River and Taos Ski Valley, which border the Columbine-Hondo. Red River would receive four parcels of land to be used for a wastewater treatment plant, a cemetery, a public park and a public road, while Taos Ski Valley would receive a parcel to be used for a wastewater treatment plant. Language was also included to satisfy cyclists, as bicycles are not allowed in wilderness areas.

“The Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Act will expand the majestic Wheeler Peak Wilderness by approximately 650 acres,” the delegation release states. “Also, the Act would modify 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.”

Conservationists statewide are excitedly heralding the bills’ reintroduction. The Wilderness Society points to the area’s importance as a watershed, draining into the Red River and R’o Hondo, as well as its cultural and recreational significance. A release from the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance emphasized the “slower, more natural pace” that is emphasized in wilderness areas, in which motorized and mechanized travel are prohibited.

“In the past 30-plus years, the area has become more deserving of inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System, ensuring that mining, roads, clear-cutting and other industrial development will not carve this very special place,” the Alliance’s release states.

An announcement from the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition touts the diverse and widespread support the effort has received.

“Taos Pueblo thanks our federal delegation for these two Columbine-Hondo bill introductions to Congress,” Taos Pueblo War Chief Samuel Gomez is quoted as saying in the release. “Through these actions, Senator Udall, Senator Heinrich and Congressman Luján shine as protectors of Mother Earth. This Columbine-Hondo wilderness bill will ensure that these mountains, its waters and forests, are protected for future generations of all species here.”

Acequia parciantes, land grant heirs and ranchers have also been vocal in their support for the wilderness designation.

“My appreciation and love of the land comes from my father and grandfather,” grazing permittee Erminio Mart’nez is quoted as saying in the release. “Our livelihoods depend on this land remaining the way it is. The Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Act will protect a key water source that individuals, families and businesses depend upon.”

The economic development potential of a new wilderness in Taos County has been widely touted.

“Columbine-Hondo is known for its outstanding hunting, fishing, hiking and camping,” Trout Unlimited’s New Mexico public lands coordinator Toner Mitchell is quoted as saying in the

Coalition release. “My business and family depend on us all protecting the elk, R’o Grande cutthroat trout and bighorn sheep. The Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Act will do just that.”

To view the legislation, a bill summary and a map of the proposed wilderness, along with boundary changes to the Wheeler Peak Wilderness, visit www.scribd.com/doc/137374502.

More information about the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition can be found at www.columbinehondo.org.



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The rugged, 45,000-acre Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area as photographed from the air, courtesy of LightHawk, Feb. 27. Looking West, the meadows below Gold Hill (12,711 feet) are visible in the foreground, while Lobo Peak (12,115), left, and Flag Mountain (11,946) frame the Taos Plateau.