

Editorial

Congress: Preserve Columbine-Hondo as a wilderness forever

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Less than a month after the R'o Grande del Norte was made a national monument, our congressional delegation requested full protection for another wilderness area. Bills were filed, appropriately around Earth Day, in the U.S. Senate and House to make the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Area a reality.

Columbine-Hondo has been a wilderness study area for more than three decades. We say to Congress that's more than enough time to realize how important an asset these 45,000 acres are to us in Northern New Mexico.

First off, Columbine-Hondo is a pretty piece of rugged land with high peaks, such as the 12,700-foot Gold Hill, alpine forests and wildlife, such as mountain lions and bighorn sheep.

Again, like the new national monument, Columbine-Hondo legislation would allow for traditional uses like hunting and grazing. People would continue to fish and camp. Concessions were made to permit bicycle trails on the periphery of the area.

And, a full wilderness designation would ensure protection of the watershed that feeds the Red River, R'o Hondo, acequias and ultimately the R'o Grande — an important consideration in these drought years.

What permanent wilderness status would prohibit are mining, roads, clear-cutting forests and other industrial uses.

Like the R'o Grande del Norte National Monument, Columbine-Hondo has broad support from a number of groups including local governments, Taos Pueblo, land grant groups, conservationists and ranchers.

Such a unified front clearly demonstrates the value of Columbine-Hondo. We, too, offer our support.

Columbine-Hondo is among the last pieces of the southern Sangre de Cristo range left to be protected. Coupled with the new national monument, it could be a big draw to tourists who want to experience the wilderness we are fortunate to have in our backyard.

Retired Sen. Jeff Bingaman introduced a bill during the last Congressional session to create the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Area. Unfortunately, it was a casualty of the bipartisan standoff.

We thank U.S. Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich, and Rep. Ben Ray Luján for continuing this cause.

The bill is now with the House Natural Resources and Senate Energy and Natural Resources committees. We encourage the committees to move this bill along, Better yet, we urge our readers to contact committee members, who are too numerous to list. Here are two online sources: naturalresources.house.gov/about/members.htm and energy.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/members.

Let them know how important the Columbine-Hondo is to you.