

Act proposes Ute, San Antonio wildernesses

By Matthew van Buren

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The Rio Grande del Norte may have been designated a national monument this spring, but congressional efforts to create wilderness areas around Ute Mountain and the Rio San Antonio continue.

Earlier legislation to create a Rio Grande del Norte Conservation Area around the Rio Grande Gorge also contained language that would have established a 13,420-acre "Cerro del Yuta Wilderness" around Ute Mountain in Taos County and an 8,000-acre "Rio San Antonio Wilderness" in Rio Arriba County.

President Obama used his powers under the Antiquities Act to create the 242,555-acre Rio Grande del Norte National Monument March 25, but a May 16 markup by the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources keeps a piece of the conservation area legislation in play.

An amendment to the bill revises language so instead of creating a conservation area it seeks to "establish certain wilderness areas in the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument." The new legislation is known as the "Cerros del Norte Conservation Act."

U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-NM, sits on the committee and co-sponsored legislation introduced by U.S. Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM, to create the conservation area and wildernesses. U.S. Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-NM, introduced companion legislation in the House.

Sam DesGeorges, manager of the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Taos field office, said the BLM's existing land-use plans identify the Rio San Antonio as a wilderness study area and Ute Mountain as an area that has "wilderness characteristics." He said the BLM will continue to protect the cultural, natural and scientific resources in both areas.

Hunting, fishing and conservation groups in New Mexico are praising the committee's vote to create the two wildernesses. According to a joint release from Trout Unlimited, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers and the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, officially designating the new wilderness areas would give the areas the "highest level of protection available for natural, historical and cultural resources" while continuing to allow hunting, fishing and other traditional uses.

"The additional protections contained in this new legislation will finish the campaign to permanently protect the Rio Grande del Norte," Max Trujillo, sportsman organizer for the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, is quoted as saying in the release. "These two wilderness designations will ensure that future generations of hunters and fishermen will always have truly wild places to visit in Northern New Mexico."

Toner Mitchell, Trout Unlimited public lands coordinator for New Mexico, said wilderness designation is necessary to protect the trout stream that runs through San Antonio Canyon.

“New Mexico’s coldwater fisheries need all the protection they can get, and this bill will go a long way to ensure that the Rio San Antonio remains clean and pure,” he is quoted as saying. “It also ensures that our thriving recreation-based economy will continue to create jobs in Northern New Mexico.”

The amended bill joins another pending piece of legislation that would create a wilderness around the 45,000-acre Columbine-Hondo area north of Taos. The Columbine-Hondo has been designated a “Wilderness Study Area” since 1980. Udall and Luján also introduced Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Acts in the Senate and House, respectively. Those bills are still in committee.