

## Sen. Heinrich's birthday hike hypes Columbine/Hondo

By J.R. Logan

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The aspens had already shed their fall colors up Columbine Canyon Friday (Oct. 17) laying a carpet of golden leaves on the forest floor. For Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-NM, it was the perfect place to turn 43.

"It's one of those really special places that defines the character of Northern New Mexico," Heinrich said over the din of the rushing creek beside him. "It's been near and dear to my heart for a long time."

Heinrich's birthday hike last week wasn't exactly aimed at solitude. Instead, the short jaunt through the woods included about a dozen invited representatives of the Forest Service, local outfitters, and conservation nonprofits. And Heinrich was eager to tout efforts to turn about 45,000-acres known as the Columbine/Hondo area into a permanent wilderness area.

In 1980, the Columbine/ Hondo became a "Wilderness Study Area" — a Congressional designation meant to enact temporarily wilderness management guidelines. According to the legislation, these areas were meant to be revisited a few years later, and Heinrich said most of these study areas got full wilderness status decades ago. But Columbine/ Hondo has been left in limbo.

"This was one of those that just kind of got left out," Heinrich said.

The fear of those behind the local effort give Columbine/ Hondo full wilderness status is that, until such a designation is made, the door is still open for things like new development or the intrusion of mechanized vehicles.

Last April, Heinrich co-sponsored a bill introduced by Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM to make permanent the wilderness designation. But the bill has been hung up in committee. The website [govtrack.us](http://govtrack.us) gives the bill a 2 percent chance of making it through Congress.

Recent efforts to create the R'o Grande del Norte National Conservation Area were also stymied by Washington gridlock. For years, legislation sat idle. But in that case, the New Mexico delegation and a local coalition were able to lobby the president to enact similar protection by unilaterally designating the same area as a national monument.

When it comes to wilderness areas, no such backdoor exists. Congress must act in order to create a permanent wilderness area, and the Columbine/ Hondo isn't the only candidate in Taos

County. Heinrich pointed out there are also efforts to establish wilderness areas inside the R'o Grande del Norte Monument — one at Ute Mountain and another at San Antonio Mountain.

Heinrich said Friday he'll continue to push wilderness legislation despite disfunction in Washington. And he said the broad local coalition that supports the Columbine/Hondo will be key to finally making it happen. "Eventually this will get done because of that community support," Heinrich said.