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Columbine/Hondo bill one step closer to approval

By J.R. Logan

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A bill meant to permanently establish the Columbine/ Hondo Wilderness Area has made it out of committee and is expected to go to a full vote before the U.S. Senate.

Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich are co-sponsoring legislation that would designate 45,000 acres inside the Carson National Forest as the Columbine/Hondo Wilderness Area. A companion bill has been filed in the House by Rep. Ben Ray Lujan.

The area lies north of the Rio Hondo and stretches as far as the town of Red River. The rugged section of the Sangre de Cristos boasts several peaks over 11,000 feet and is the headwaters of several rivers and streams that feed into the Rio Grande.

The Columbine/Hondo became a “wilderness study area” in 1980, meaning it has enjoyed most protections afforded any wilderness area. However, the area has been passed over for full wilderness designation. A coalition of local outdoorsmen, conservationists and elected officials are pushing the bill with the hope of permanently protecting the area.

Heinrich was in Taos County last month to hike in the Columbine/Hondo and bring attention to the bill. “It’s one of those really special places that defines the character of Northern New Mexico,” Heinrich told *The Taos News* during that hike.

He added the broad support of locals will be key to getting the bill through Congress. A Senate vote on the bill had not been scheduled as of press time.

The act would also convey several small parcels of land currently owned by the Forest Service to two municipalities located adjacent to the proposed wilderness area.

Under the bill, the Forest Service would give the village of Taos Ski Valley a 4.6-acre parcel of land on which its wastewater treatment plant is located.

Taos Ski Valley Mayor Neal King said if the village owned the lot, it would no longer have to go through the Forest Service’s drawn-out permitting requirements, which can delay improvements or expansions. The plant would still be under the oversight of state regulators.

If approved, the bill would also give the town of Red River title to about 40 acres, including several parcels of land now occupied by Malette Park, the town cemetery and the town’s wastewater treatment plant. Those services have existed for decades on Forest Service land thanks to special use permits.

Red River Mayor Linda Calhoun did not return a call seeking comment.

The bill dictates that the municipalities will pay survey costs, but the land will be given by the Forest Service at no cost.

Because the village is essentially boxed in by Forest Service land, King said finding any property on which to build public infrastructure is challenging. And even though he said land in the resort village can cost as much as \$1 million an acre, he said officials there have explored the possibility of purchasing the water treatment plant parcel outright. “We’ve always said that if push comes to shove, we’ll buy it,” King said.

That’s what at least one representative of the Forest Service said the feds would like to see.

In November 2013, Leslie Weldon, a deputy chief with the U.S. Forest Service, gave testimony before a Senate subcommittee. Weldon said the department supported the bill’s proposal to make permanent the wilderness designation, though she did express reservations about the land transfers.

Weldon said as a “matter of general precedent,” the agency supports these kinds of transfers only when the federal government receives “appropriate consideration” — in other words, cash.

Both municipalities expressed support for designation (beyond the land transfers); Red River’s 2013 comprehensive plan notes it would likely be a boon because of increased recreation and tourism.



Katharine Egli

U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, right, checks a map of the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area with Jerry Mastel, left, a Questa District ranger, and Stuart Wilde, center, founder of Wilde Earth Llama Adventures during a hike Oct. 17. Heinrich, who was celebrating his birthday that day, co-sponsored legislation with U.S. Sen. Tom Udall to designate 45,000 acres inside the Carson National Forest as the Columbine/Hondo Wilderness Area.