



THE TAOS NEWS

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Columbine/ Hondo tacked on to defense bill

By J. R. Logan

The Taos News, 12/4/2014

Legislation to create the Columbine/Hondo Wilderness has been tied to a defense spending package that will likely go to a vote in Congress before the end of the year.

The bill, co-sponsored by Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., and Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., would put permanent wilderness protection on about 45,000 acres in the Carson National Forest. The rugged and isolated area is cherished by wilderness proponents for its beauty, abundant wildlife and recreational opportunities. "We are closer than ever to making historic gains in protecting some of New Mexico's most treasured landscapes," said Heinrich in a statement released Tuesday (Dec. 3).

The Columbine/Hondo bill has been attached to the National Defense Authorization Act, which authorizes funding for military and national security activities.

Among the legislation tied to the defense bill are measures to change management of the Valles Caldera National Preserve, establish the Manhattan Project National Historical Park. Also included is a bill to extend a pilot program that, according to a release from Heinrich's office, would "streamline the oil and gas drilling permit process while strengthening a review system that helps meet environmental and safety standards."

— *J.R. Logan*