



THE TAOS NEWS

Best U.S. Weekly Paper- NNA 2007, 2008, 2010
Inland Press Nation's Best Weekly Newspaper 2009

Columbine/Hondo heads for approval

Some worry lands package a net loss for environment

By J.R. Logan

The Taos News, 12/11/2011

Legislation to permanently establish the Columbine/Hondo Wilderness is on a fast track to becoming law, but there are concerns inside and outside Taos County that a deal would be a net loss for the environment.

"There's some ugly underwear in there for sure," said Garrett VeneKlausen, a Taos County resident and executive director of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation. "Unfortunately, that's the nature of the beast: forsaking the perfect for the good."

The Columbine/Hondo Wilderness Act was one of dozens of public lands bills recently rolled into the National Defense Authorization Act — a must-pass military funding bill that looks likely to make it through Congress and to the president's desk. The bill passed the House Dec. 4, and the Senate is expected to pass it this week.

For New Mexico, language included in the bill would: create the Columbine/Hondo Wilderness Area; transfer management of the Valles Caldera to improve public access; and establish the Manhattan Project National Historical Park in Los Alamos.

The Columbine/Hondo legislation in the defense authorization mirrors a bill introduced last April by Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM, and co-sponsored by Martin Heinrich, D-NM. A companion bill was introduced in the House by Rep. Ben Ray Lujan, D-NM.

While creating a new, 45,000-acre wilderness area north of Taos, the act would also redraw the Wheeler Peak Wilderness boundary to create a loop trail accessible to mountain bikes. In addition, the legislation would convey several small parcels of land currently owned by the Forest Service to two municipalities located adjacent to the proposed wilderness area.

Practically speaking, the Columbine/Hondo area has officially enjoyed wilderness protection since it became a Wilderness Study Area in 1980. But in the subsequent 34 years that status was never made permanent. Locally, there's been broad support to set the wilderness designation in stone to preserve an area renowned for its scenic beauty and ecologic diversity.

However, other provisions tacked on to the defense bill at the last minute have riled up environmental groups nationwide who say too many industry-friendly concessions were made to get relatively small conservation measures like Columbine/Hondo approved. Issues inciting particular heartburn are provisions to streamline the permitting process for oil and gas

development on federal lands, as well as a land swap in Arizona that would trade away Forest Service property to a international mining company, outraging some leaders of the nearby San Carlos Apache tribe.

Given the rank partisanship that defines D.C. today, this sort of horse trading might be the only way to get wilderness designations approved. The last Congress was dubbed “the worst Congress for wilderness ever,” because it failed to designate even a single acre of wilderness. If passed, the current bill would end that dry streak. But the makeup of the massive public lands package suggests the era of stand-alone wilderness bills — bills that once enjoyed bi-partisan support — is over.

For conservationists eager to get something done right now, the controversial package might be the most they can expect. For New Mexico’s senators the deal was a victory.

“On balance, it’s quite good. And for New Mexico, it’s really fantastic,” said Heinrich, in an interview with *The Taos News* Wednesday (Dec. 10).

Heinrich acknowledged he has been opposed to some provisions included in the final package — including the Arizona land swap — but he said the deal represents a compromise to finally break through the gridlock in Congress. He also said the New Mexico-related language would be a boon to the environment and local economies that rely on tourism and recreation.

Sen. Udall had a similar message. “I would expect if we can keep our four or five bills in there, then people will be very happy with the result on the ground in New Mexico,” he said in a conference call with reporters Tuesday (Dec. 9).

Some longtime supporters of the Columbine/Hondo bill agree the impact locally would be positive, and that the public lands package is a step in the right direction. “If this is the beginning of the land management discussion becoming more serious instead of ideological, then I’ll welcome it,” said Toner Mitchell, New Mexico Public Lands Coordinator for Trout Unlimited, in an interview Tuesday. Trout Unlimited has been behind the Columbine/Hondo wilderness designation as a way to improve habitat for the R’o Grande cutthroat trout, which has been on the verge of endangered status.

“For New Mexico, [the wilderness designation] is an unequivocal victory for the R’o Grande cutthroat trout. And for that reason, I’m going to take it,” Mitchell said.

Roberta Salazar with Arroyo Seco-based Rivers and Birds said she was thrilled the Columbine/Hondo was moving forward and said it would be a step in protecting vital watersheds. But she said the fact that it was lumped with other, less environmentally friendly bills made it a “mixed blessing.”

“It’s just the reality of our political system and our world today,” Salazar said, noting things happened so quickly there wasn’t much anyone could do to change the details of the deal. “We’re just doing what we can in our backyard.”

Erik Schlenker-Goodrich, an attorney and executive director of the Western Environmental Law Center in Taos, said the victory for the Columine/Hondo is overshadowed by what he considers more damaging parts of the bill. “People should take a broad view where we don’t elevate a wilderness designation, even one that’s in our backyard, at the expense of other areas,” he said in an interview Tuesday.

Schlenker-Goodrich said wilderness advocates should have opposed the current rider and waited until stand-alone conservation legislation stands a better chance in Washington, even if that takes years.

“Just because it is the best compromise we can get does not make it a good compromise,” Schlenker-Goodrich said.

Schlenker-Goodrich pointed out several provisions he called “problematic.” In particular he said a part of the bill meant to streamline oil and gas permitting makes some sense, but it could mean energy development near Chaco Canyon will hit the ground before the Bureau of Land Management has a chance to do adequate planning in the area.

Santa Fe-based WildEarth Guardians was among dozens of groups that signed a letter asking members of Congress to scrap the public lands rider because it “would undermine some of our nation’s preeminent environmental and public lands.” WildEarth Guardians Executive Director John Horning told *The Taos News* Tuesday some organizations pushing wilderness designations often take an “acres at any cost” approach. But he thinks in this case, the total cost is too high.

“Am I happy the Columbine/ Hondo is going to be designated a wilderness? Sure,” said Horning. “But is that really valuable given the bigger conservation challenges we face?”

Horning said his organization is especially concerned about a change that would ease environmental oversight of grazing on public lands — something his group sees as a major contributor to water quality degradation across the West. Horning says WildEarth Guardians successfully fought to get language in the bill that would have made room for grazing permits to be bought out, but it was cut from the version that got lumped into the defense authorization.

“I realize the congressional process is a messy one, but when you get very small things in exchange for this that affects tens of millions of acres, I don’t think it’s a fair bargain,” Horning said.