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Columbine/Hondo hinges on Obama

By J.R. Logan

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The U.S. Senate passed legislation Friday (Dec. 12) that includes the designation of the Columbine/Hondo Wilderness.

The Columbine/Hondo area includes 45,000 acres in the Carson National Forest just north of Taos. The area is treasured as a headwaters for several rivers and creeks and prime wildlife habitat. The designation enjoys the broad coalition of sportsmen, conservationists, politicians and tribal leaders.

The bill was approved by the Senate 89-11. The House of Representatives approved it Dec. 4. It will now go to the president's desk for his signature.

While stand-alone wilderness bills haven't made much progress in Washington in recent years, the Columbine/ Hondo managed to get through on the back of the must-pass National Defense Authorization Act. The Columbine/Hondo was one of several wilderness provisions included in a massive public lands package tied to the defense spending authorization. In all, the legislation passed Friday would create nearly 250,000 acres of wilderness in several states. However, the public lands package drew considerable criticism from environmental groups who felt the deal made too many concessions to industry in exchange for limited conservation gains.

In addition to the Columbine/Hondo, the bill would change management of the Valles Caldera to improve public access, as well as create a national historical park in Los Alamos that would tell the story of the creation of the atomic bomb.

The package also includes a provision meant to streamline permitting for oil and gas permitting on public lands.

New Mexico's senators issued a joint press release Friday afternoon trumpeting the "massive gains" for the state that were included in the bill. Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM, introduced the Columbine/ Hondo Wilderness Act last April. It was co-sponsored by Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-NM.

"This is an exciting day for everyone who enjoys public lands and parks in New Mexico," Udall said in the release. "Scores of New Mexicans deserve credit for helping us get these bills across the finish line — from former Sen. Bingaman, who first introduced them, to the diverse group of sportsmen, conservationists, local business people and others who have put years of hard work into them. Protecting these special and important places will increase tourism and create jobs in the surrounding communities while ensuring New Mexicans can enjoy them for generations to come."

Heinrich also lauded the economic benefits of the bills provisions, saying the new designations would add to the state's allure for travelers while preserving a landscape held dear by New Mexicans. "Together, we have a responsibility to future generations to be good stewards of our shared culture and our natural world," Heinrich said.

The Columbine/Hondo became a wilderness study area in 1980. If signed by the president, wilderness protections would become permanent in an area valued for its scenic beauty and ecological diversity.

"One of the main reasons people visit the Taos area is to marvel at and venture into our magnificent wilderness areas and public wild lands," said outfitter Stuart Wilde. "Protecting public wild lands like the Columbine Hondo promotes tourism and outdoor recreation. When people visit New Mexico to marvel at and recreate in our pristine wilderness areas, it creates jobs and benefits the local economy, while protecting the land for future generations."

In addition, the legislation would redraw the boundary of the Wheeler Peak Wilderness to create a loop trail open to mountain bikes. It will also direct the Forest Service to convey service small parcels to municipalities adjacent to the wilderness.

"Red River is dependent on tourism and Columbine Hondo is essential to the economic viability of our businesses," said Red River Mayor Linda Calhoun in a press release. "Surveys have shown that the beauty of the area is the number one reason people visit, so our community understands the importance of protecting the area and preserving that beauty for future generations."

A press release from state sportsmen organizations lauded the bill's passage as protecting "outstanding" hunting and fishing lands.

"Once again, our congressional delegation has acknowledged the strong community appreciation of this area and responded by giving the Columbine/ Hondo the highest protection available – wilderness," said Garrett VeneKlasen, executive director of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation and a Taos County resident, in a press release. "It means our children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy this amazing place and pass it on to future generations just as we have."

Heinrich offered his thoughts on the public lands provisions on the Senate floor Thursday. In his comments, Heinrich said the legislation was vital to New Mexico's recreation and tourism industries.