



THE TAOS NEWS

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Editorial

Congrats on Columbine/ Hondo but other enviro issues are pressing

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The Columbine/Hondo Wilderness is a done deal, save for President Barack Obama's signature.

We'd like to congratulate the coalition that pushed for approval of Columbine/Hondo. Members of that group have worked for years to protect what they consider priceless resources — 45,000 acres of clean water, serene forest and diverse wildlife. No doubt, these are characteristics worth preserving. We have been writing editorials in favor of the wilderness areas since the 1970s. However, we're concerned the machinations in Washington bundled an obviously worthy bill with plenty of other provisions that will be detrimental to environmental quality across the region, the state, and even in Taos County. The Columbine/Hondo Act was one of several wilderness proposals and other public lands measures tacked onto the must-pass National Defense Authorization Act. The House passed the massive bill Dec. 4, and the Senate approved it Dec. 12. Now it goes to the president.

It's a victory for wilderness supporters. But we can't help but wonder: What price was paid to get permanent protection for an area that faced no imminent threat of development? We don't at all blame local supporters of Columbine/Hondo for the way the bill made it past the House and Senate. But we worry that given the polarized politics in Washington, this sort of horse trading is the only way wilderness designations are going to succeed.

For instance, part of the big public lands package would streamline oil and gas permitting on public lands. That provision could impact areas near Chaco Canyon before adequate planning on controlled development is done. Drilling near Chaco? Anyone concerned about New Mexico's natural and cultural landscapes should have strong opinions about that provision.

There's also language in the bill that will ease environmental oversight of people who graze livestock on public lands. Taos residents and officials are already concerned about contamination from grazing up Taos Canyon. The language awaiting the president's signature will make it harder for the community and the Forest Service to protect water quality from bad actors.

All this is to caution local conservationists to look beyond wilderness and show the same kind of enthusiasm for really pressing issues affecting our beautiful area.

Just days after the bill made it through Congress, many of the same Columbine/Hondo supporters were again before the Taos County Commission asking for support in a new wilderness effort south of Taos. There is also interest in designating Ute Mountain and San Antonio Mountain as wilderness areas inside the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

Again, these are gorgeous areas. But other environmental issues deserve our attention at the same time.

In Taos County, a top priority should be finding ways to treat overgrown forests that surround nearly all of our communities. As we've seen elsewhere, catastrophic wildfires can decimate landscapes and kill economies. The effects of climate change will only make this worse.

There is already a real effort underway in Taos to address the wildfire situation. That effort could use a lot more support, especially from the same community organizers who have a track record in getting environmental legislation passed. These activists obviously have the ear of our congressional delegation, and we think if they called for greater attention to our forests and watersheds in a single voice, it could produce great and tangible results.

Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-NM, has already introduced a watershed bill that could benefit from community support. Heinrich is also fighting to address federal wildfire management to put more money into preventing fires through treatment rather than spending billions putting them out.

Environmentalists: why not take a more vocal stand on these pressing problems?

Wilderness is a noble cause. But for local conservationists, it should not be the only one.