

Wilderness advocates set sights on Pecos expansion

by **J.R. Logan**

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Fresh off a victory getting Columbine/Hondo Wilderness legislation past Congress, wilderness advocates have set their sights on designating additional special protections in an area that includes about 28,000 acres of Forest Service land in southern Taos County.

Those behind the proposal say it will continue the momentum of protecting valuable landscapes from future development while preserving longstanding traditions closely tied to the forest. But some groups, including the New Mexico Acequia Commission, have raised concerns the protections of a wilderness designation could inadvertently hurt acequia users in the area.

The existing Pecos Wilderness Area covers 224,000 acres and spans the Carson National Forest and Santa Fe National Forest. Proponents, including the New Mexico Wildlife Federation and the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, would like to see an additional 120,000 of existing "roadless area" turned into wilderness or become a "Special Management Area." Those acres would cover land in Taos, Mora, Rio Arriba, Santa Fe and San Miguel counties. The practical effect of the new designations would be to prohibit new roads, mechanized travel or resource extraction like mining. Such changes would need to be approved by Congress.

Max Trujillo with the New Mexico Wildlife Federation told the Taos County Commission, Tuesday (Dec. 16) protecting this and other areas is key to ensuring public access to treasured areas.

"This is ours. This is our ranch. This is our place that we all share in common," Trujillo said. A resolution presented to the commission for approval states the areas around the Pecos "are prime watersheds, and in their natural condition provide many benefits including clean and abundant water supplies, clean air and superior wildlife habitat."

Wilderness advocates speaking before the commission also stressed the proposed designations would set in stone existing provisions that limit motorized access and prohibit woodcutting. Any grazing in the area would be allowed to continue, advocates say. They also contend maintaining watersheds improves water quality for acequia users downstream.

But in a Nov. 18 letter to the county commission, Ralph Vigil, chairman of the New Mexico Acequia Commission, expressed "serious concerns" about the expansion of the wilderness area. "The proposal may have the unintended effect of placing additional stress on traditional users of water," the letter reads.

The letter asks the county commission to wait until all stakeholders — including nearby acequias — are able to have their voices heard and concerns addressed.

At Tuesday's meeting, at least two commissioners heeded that advice. Outgoing commissioner Larry Sánchez and commission chairman Gabe Romero both voted against the resolution supporting the wilderness. Sánchez said he couldn't vote in favor of the resolution until the coalition got all stakeholders — including acequia users — on board. Romero voiced similar concerns.

Commissioners Tom Blankenhorn and Dan Barrone voted in favor of the resolution. "I think it's critical that we protect what little roadless land we have left," Blankenhorn said.

Because of the tie vote, the resolution didn't pass. Outgoing commissioner Joe Mike Durán was not present.

Those asking the commission to adopt the resolution said they are organizing meetings with acequia users with the hope of allaying their concerns and getting their support. They stressed that there is no acequia infrastructure in the lands proposed for new designations, and they insisted their intent is not to take anything from anyone.

Advocates also said they hoped to continue building grassroots support for the new designations and have legislation drafted to be introduced in Congress next year.