

Wilderness status won't mean big changes

By J.R. Logan

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The Columbine/Hondo is officially a wilderness.

President Barack Obama signed legislation Friday (Dec. 19) that included designation of 45,000 acres north of Taos as wilderness area. The Columbine/ Hondo language was part of a massive public lands package tied to an even larger defense spending bill that breezed through Congress this month.

The final step at the president's desk marked a victory for a coalition of local wilderness supporters who've pushed for permanent protection of the area. Supporters cite a diversity of wildlife, stunning landscapes and vital headwaters as reasons for preserving the area from future development.

Achieving wilderness status will put in stone protections that have, at least on paper, been in place since the Columbine/Hondo became a Wilderness Study Area in 1980.

According to local Forest Service officials, the formal designation won't change much on the ground.

"For the general public, there shouldn't be much of a change," said Ricardo Mart'nez, acting district ranger for the Questa Ranger District, in an interview Monday (Dec. 22). "There won't be a palpable change for most people."

Members of the wilderness coalition have said a formal designation was needed to ensure there would be no development in the area that could threaten the wilderness characteristics. As a Wilderness Study Area, the Columbine/Hondo was not totally safe, they argued.

To a certain extent, that's true, according to Kathy DeLucas, public affairs officer for the Carson National Forest.

DeLucas wrote in an email last week the wilderness designation signed into law Friday will give the agency "more teeth" when it comes to citing people who are violating wilderness rules (rules like no motorized use inside the wilderness boundaries).

DeLucas explained the agency has clear regulations when it comes to proper wilderness, but not for wilderness study areas.

Francisco Valenzuela, director of Recreation, Heritage & Wilderness for the Forest Service's regional office in Albuquerque, says Columbine/Hondo's permanent wilderness status puts to rest any questions of what will become of the area.

“When it’s a Wilderness Study Area, think of it as being frozen in time,” he said in an interview Friday. “We’re managing it to maintain it’s character until we make a decision about [it’s value as a wilderness]. But now, it’s not going to change. It’s not open for reconsideration. That’s one of the most reassuring aspects: It’s now become a congressional decision, so that gives it a lot of protection.”

Wilderness status comes with some clear rules — no mechanized travel, no mining, no timber harvesting.

But Valenzuela also pointed out that the detailed definition of “wilderness” is fluid. The Forest Service is always weighing how best to manage an area to meet wilderness goals, and it has to ask questions about even the simplest proposals, questions like: “Should we build a bridge for hikers across that creek?”

The ensuing debate is mostly rooted in an even more philosophical question: “What is wilderness?”

In 1921, Aldo Leopold, the father of federal government’s wilderness protection program, defined wilderness as “a continuous stretch of country preserved in its natural state, open to lawful hunting and fishing, big enough to absorb a two weeks’ pack trip, kept devoid of roads, artificial trails, cottages or other works of man.”

Forty-three years later, the language of the Wilderness Act defined wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

The act further defines wilderness as ““an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions ...” Another half-century on, Valenzuela said the Forest Service is constantly trying to adapt the spirit of the wilderness act to new technology and management strategies that the law could have never predicted.

For instance, the agency has been in a national debate recently about whether wildlife agencies should be able to use helicopters in wilderness areas to relocate wildlife. There was also a recent controversy about whether commercial filming can take place in wilderness areas.

For Valenzuela, even the question of whether cell phones should be allowed in a wilderness area could be debated, though he said any suggestion to ban them would obviously be met with fierce resistance.

“Again, we’re asking ourselves the question: ‘What is the right balance?’” he said. Pragmatism, Valenzuela argues, is the best approach to getting past ideological and moving toward real management practices.

While wilderness, in general, enjoys a “hands-off” management style, that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s cheaper to administer. Nor does it mean it’s a lot more expensive.

“When we take management actions in wilderness, unit-per-unit it is more expensive,” Valenzuela said. “But we don’t do as much, so overall the expense is probably less.”

Since mechanized equipment like chainsaws aren't generally allowed in wilderness areas, work that could be done in hours can take days in a wilderness, making it more costly.

Valenzuela also said wilderness status can increase visitation, meaning there has to be more work dealing with impacts from campers and hunters.

On the flip side, wilderness areas are devoid of costly infrastructure investments like new roads or major habitat improvement projects.