

## My Turn

# Columbine-Hondo Wilderness: Finally!

**Eric E. Patterson**

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Forty-two years ago my friends Al and Judy hiked with me into a roadless area of the Carson National Forest, camped overnight, and returned home to write letters to the Forest Service. We recommended that this roadless area near Taos Ski Valley be considered for wilderness designation. This place was breathtakingly beautiful. The mountainsides were alive with June flowers while the shaded valleys were still covered with deep snow.

A lot has happened since then. The Forest Service did indeed designate the area as the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area, meaning that it would be considered for possible wilderness designation, permanently protected from development. It remained a "study area" for decades.

Forty years is a long time for people to make up their mind about something. Although various people over the years have proposed the Congressional action needed to finalize the wilderness designation, not much had really happened until just a few years ago when the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition was formed.

This group actively solicited the support of citizens, businesses, acequia associations, tribal leaders, land grants, farmers, ranchers, hunters, fishermen, government officials and everyone else who would listen. They took the letters of support to members of Congress and suggested that congressional action was long overdue. Sen. Tom Udall, Sen.

Martin Heinrich, Congressman Ben Ray Lujan and former Sen. Jeff Bingaman were very enthusiastic. They and the members of their staff visited here with the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition and pledged their support. After the needed bill was introduced in Congress, it died without action several times. Finally, in 2014, the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Act was included as part of a major spending bill, which was passed and signed into law by President Obama.

Many people deserve our thanks for making this happen. All the citizens, leaders, businesses, organizations. Those people that formed the Coalition are especially deserving of our gratitude, Roberta Salazar, Stuart Wilde, John Olivas, Peggy Nelson, and Michael Casaus, to name just a few. They saw what was needed and organized so many people and organizations who had wanted this wilderness to happen, focused them, and brought them together.

And people working together can really get things done!

I fish in the R'o Hondo and the Red River in water that comes from the Columbine- Hondo Wilderness. I get the water to grow organic fruit and vegetables at Stony Acre Farm in Valdez from the Columbine- Hondo Wilderness. My wife and I hike in the Columbine- Hondo Wilderness. And this summer when my grandchildren from Chicago come to visit, they will be able to hike in the same mountains that their grandfather did 42 years ago, in the Columbine- Hondo Wilderness.

Finally!

Come to the Columbine- Hondo Wilderness celebration Saturday (Feb. 14), from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Taos Mesa Brewery. Honored guests will be Sen. Udall, Sen. Heinrich, and Congressman Lujn. There will be an enchilada bar and music by Dread Fermata.

*Eric Patterson is a resident of Valdez.*