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Wilderness status proposed for San Antonio, Ute Mountain

By J.R. Logan

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New Mexico's senators are co-sponsoring a bill that would establish two wilderness areas inside the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

Tom Udall, D-NM, and Martin Heinrich, D-NM, announced Thursday (May 7) the introduction of the Cerros del Norte Act, which would create a combined 21,420 acres of wilderness in far northern Taos County.

The act proposes to create the 8,000-acre Rio San Antonio Wilderness on the west end of the gorge, off U.S. 64, as well as the 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta (Ute Mountain) Wilderness on the east side of the gorge, near Costilla.

Both areas would fall within the 242,000-acre Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, which was created by executive order in 2013.

While the president has the power to designate a national monument, any new wilderness must get congressional approval.

"It's another one of those examples of a long process that has really had incredible community support," Heinrich told

The Taos News in an interview Thursday afternoon. "These two areas are just really unique in terms of resources within the context of the overall monument."

All of the land to be designated as wilderness is currently administered by the Bureau of Land Management. Wilderness protection essentially prevents future development, including the construction of roads as well as motorized travel, in areas deemed unique because of their wilderness characteristics. Wilderness is famously defined in the 1964 Wilderness Act as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor and does not remain."

"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 Stuart Wilde, a local outfitter, in a press release on the bill's introduction from the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance. "Protecting wilderness within the incredible Rio Grande del Norte National Monument will only enhance our tourism and outdoor recreation."

Like other local conservation initiatives, this effort has enjoyed the support of a broad coalition of sportsmen, businesses and traditional communities. The proposal for a wilderness area on Ute

Mountain has met some resistance from a handful of Costilla residents worried it could affect nearby ranching operations on private land. The bill specifically protects existing grazing rights on public land.

The wilderness bill introduced Thursday mirrors failed legislation co-sponsored by the same Senators in 2013.

While that bill died, a separate bill to create the Columbine/ Hondo Wilderness (also in Taos County) was lumped into a massive public lands package in late 2014. The package breezed through Congress attached to a defense spending bill.

However, some conservationists felt the designation of the Columbine/Hondo was made bittersweet by industry-friendly provisions also in the package, such as easing regulation of grazing and fast-tracking the approval of oil and gas leases on public lands, including areas near Chaco Canyon.

Some environmental groups worry these sorts of unbalanced trade-offs will become more common in Washington, where gridlock has essentially put an end to the viability of a standalone wilderness bill.

Heinrich challenged that criticism in Thursday's interview.

"I think you've got to be flexible these days," he said, asserting that last year's public lands package was "on balance, a very good piece of legislation."

Heinrich said he'd try to get the bill passed on its own, but would be willing to get it through as part of another package.

Heinrich said the two proposed wilderness areas don't currently face the threat of development or industrial activity, but he said that was no reason not to act. "I prefer to do the conservation work before there's an imminent threat," Heinrich said.



Ute Mountain, pictured in this file photo, is one of two proposed wilderness areas included in a bill introduced in Congress last week. Both proposed wilderness areas lie within the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.