

## What counts as wilderness worthy?

### How politics and philosophy affect attitudes on conservation

By J.R. Logan

*The Taos News*, 9/10/2015

In 2013, Jamie Connell, acting deputy director for the Bureau of Land Management, testified before a House committee on a bill that would establish the Rio San Antonio and Cerro del Yuta wilderness areas in Northern New Mexico.

Connell described the dramatic landscapes and “outstanding opportunities for solitude” inside the two areas, which both lie within a freshly designated national monument.

“The department supports the designation of these two new wilderness areas,” Connell told the committee succinctly.

But that’s not exactly what the agency was saying 24 years ago.

In 1991, during the first Bush administration, the BLM seemed underwhelmed by San Antonio, and it concluded that some of San Antonio’s wilderness characteristics were “less than outstanding.”

“While the area contains the values necessary for study, they are not considered to be of a quality to merit inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System,” the report states bluntly.

In other words: As far as wilderness goes, San Antonio is a little ho-hum.

But today, that little piece of high desert is getting another look. Rio San Antonio is half of the Cerros del Norte Conservation Act — a bill introduced by Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-NM, and co-sponsored by Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM. The legislation would create the 8,000-acre Rio San Antonio Wilderness and the 13,420-acre Cerro del Yuta (Ute Mountain) Wilderness at the far northern ends of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. The bill managed to make it out of committee and is eligible to go to a full vote before the Senate.

While the BLM’s about-face on whether the Rio San Antonio is wilderness worthy may seem like a contradiction, the explanation is a little more complex. The stark landscape at San Antonio hasn’t changed much in thousands of years, but the political landscape that could grant it wilderness status is constantly shifting. So is the interpretation of what “wilderness” is and why it’s important. “Everything about wilderness designation is politics, and frankly, it always has been,” says Craig Allin, a professor of political science at Cornell College in Iowa and author of “The Politics of Wilderness Preservation.”

Starting under the Reagan administration, Allin says wilderness became an increasingly partisan issue. More and more, wilderness designation was seen by industry as a way to block access to natural resources on public lands. At the same time, a growing movement among conservatives in the West — the Sagebrush Rebellion — was resentful of the federal government's control of vast public land holdings, and wilderness was seen yet another layer of red tape.

According to Allin, the anti- big government sentiment had some influence on how agencies like the BLM operated. "In effect, all of the agencies at some level do what they're told to do," Allin says. "Certainly, there are times when the agencies feel the administration in Washington is leaning in one direction."

So when the BLM released a series of state-by-state studies of proposed wilderness areas in the early '90s, many weren't surprised to see the agency suggest that only a fraction of the proposed acreage be designated wilderness while Republican George H.W. Bush was in the White House. Plus, Allin and others also point out that the BLM historically had been more open to allowing mining, and oil and gas production (the agency has long been nicknamed the "Bureau of Livestock and Mining"), so it wasn't a surprise the agency wasn't exactly wilderness hungry, regardless who the president was.

When the agency was reviewing San Antonio and dozens of other Wilderness Study Areas in New Mexico, there were several comments that seemed to go out of their way to dismiss it's wilderness value.

For instance, one report notes the 100-foot-deep gorge carved by the Rio San Antonio offers solitude to visitors, but it immediately points out that the "gorge" is only about 5 percent of the 7,300 acres being proposed for wilderness. "Above the canyon rims, more human activity is encountered due to the closeness of U.S. Highway 285, ORV access to U.S. Forest Service recreational lands, and ranch activity in the [wilderness study area.]" In her 2013 testimony, Acting Deputy Director Connell spun that fact in a different way: "Visitors can find outstanding opportunities for solitude as they explore the gorge, which abruptly drops out of sight from the rest of the area."

In some ways, the Cerros del Norte bill inching its way through Congress at the moment carries the torch for former Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, who carried legislation that would have established a conservation area that included the two wilderness areas. But that bill never made it through Congress. Instead, President Barack Obama used his executive authority to create a national monument in 2013.

And while the president can single-handedly create monuments, wilderness still requires an act of Congress. Thus the Cerros del Norte bill.

Jorge Silva-Ba-uelos was a staffer for Bingaman who was doing a lot of the groundwork while preparing the conservation area legislation. Since the bill would have to get the approval of legislators, he said it made sense to include a couple wilderness areas that were, as he put it, "low-hanging fruit."

"It's hard enough to get legislation passed through Congress, so we were trying to resolve a lot of other issues at the same time," Banuelos said. He contends the Rio San Antonio is an

obvious candidate for wilderness. As a Wilderness Study Area, it's already strictly managed as if it was a wilderness. Plus, he argues, a full-fledged wilderness area or two would add to the allure of the new national monument.

When asked about the apparently conflicting statements, a spokesperson for BLM said the agency now supports wilderness designation for Rio San Antonio because of "the qualities and characteristics of the broader Rio Grande del Norte landscape, updated analysis, and public interest in the area."

That explanation makes sense to Jay Turner, associate professor at Wellesley College in Massachusetts and author of "The Promise of Wilderness." "In my mind, the agency is kind of shaped by its history, by the current administration and the public," says Turner. "It's the intersection of those three factors that shape its work."

Turner and others explain the philosophy behind wilderness designation has also changed a lot in the last two decades. In practice, what began as a law used to preserve huge swaths of empty, unspoiled alpine landscapes has morphed into a way to save pockets of diverse ecosystems from development. That new mentality even appears to be changing the way federal agencies consider wilderness status.

In fact, when a bill was introduced in 2011 to release all existing Wilderness Study Areas (including Rio San Antonio) from default wilderness protection, the director of the BLM gave testimony before Congress in opposition. As part of his argument, the director argued a lot had changed since the recommendations of the early '90s were released. "During that time in a number of places, resource conditions have changed, our understanding of mineral resources has changed, and public opinion has changed," the director said. "If these suitability recommendations were made today, many of them would undoubtedly be different."

Of course, what the director didn't mention is that the politics, too, have changed.

His boss, Obama, was a Democrat. His predecessor, the one who released those reports, was working for a Republican.

---



J.R. Logan

Ute Mountain, pictured in the distance, is one of two proposed wilderness areas that lie within the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. Since the early 90s, the Bureau of Land Management has offered contradictory opinions on whether some of the land is worthy of wilderness status. Experts say those opposing attitudes have a lot to do with changing politics and changing philosophies of what 'wilderness' is.