

My Turn

A modest addition to the Pecos Wilderness

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The Taos News, 2/4/2016

The Pecos Wilderness is one of Northern New Mexico's most valuable assets. Everyone who lives here knows how precious water is to the viability of our communities and to the welfare of all. We need to be as certain as we can be that the source of this lifeblood of our communities is protected for the long term.

Wilderness designation provides this highest level of protection, and if for no other reason this is why Taos County officials should support adding acreage to the Pecos Wilderness.

A resolution to support expanded wilderness acreage in the Pecos was recently brought before the Taos County Commission upon which the Commission has yet to act. This resolution would endorse a locally crafted proposal to enhance the Pecos Wilderness by adding 120,000 acres of wilderness and special management areas to the current wilderness. Enlightened self-interest requires that we join with other counties surrounding the proposal to support it.

Potential threats in the proposed additions include mining, drilling, fracking, road construction and timber harvest. The proposal is responsive to local concerns by exclusion of some areas and special management designation for others. Fire may be fought within the additions, as allowed by the Wilderness Act and governed by the discretion of the Forest Service. With the addition of proposed land, 18 percent of the 3 million acres of the Carson and Santa Fe National Forests will be designated wilderness.

Protection of our precious water supply is only one of the reasons to support this proposal. Many of us live here because of the exceptional natural world that surrounds us, many others visit to experience these values that we enjoy daily. This is a mecca for hikers, hunters, fishermen, mountain bikers and skiers, for anyone who enjoys the outdoors. The Pecos is a truly special part of all of this with its streams, waterfalls, lakes, elk, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, and Rio Grande cutthroat, our state fish. Silence and solitude can be found on its mountain ridges, in its steep canyons, and in its expansive flower-filled meadows.

There is no doubt that the Pecos Wilderness boosts our local economy. It draws recreationists and residents. As one of the earliest parts of the National Wilderness Preservation System, the Pecos attracts visitors from all over the nation. Outdoor recreation is one of the core sustainable economic engines running in our communities, and expansion of the Pecos Wilderness will contribute to this. The New Mexico Department of Fish and Game, for instance, found that sportsmen spend more than \$613 million a year, contributing to local economies and generating more than \$51 million in state and local taxes annually.

Some concerns have been expressed that more wilderness will interfere with the rights of our traditional communities. The opposite is true. The current Pecos Wilderness has protected traditional user rights and customary uses like herb and pinon gathering, ceremonies, and most importantly water rights for land grants and acequias. Grazing would continue in the proposal, as authorized in the 1964 Wilderness Act.

Expansion of the Pecos Wilderness will serve all Americans, and especially all who live here. Taos writer John Nichols once wrote, "If these mountains die, where will our imaginations wander? ... And if the long-time people of this wonderful country are carelessly squandered by Progress, who will guide us to a better world?"

For the sakes of our mountains and our people, the Taos County Commission should approve a resolution in support of Pecos Wilderness expansion.

John Miles lives in El Prado.

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