

Wilderness advocates say poll shows support for Pecos expansion

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Wilderness advocates are touting the results of a phone survey as evidence of widespread support in Taos County for a proposed expansion of the Pecos Wilderness.

The survey was conducted in response to vocal opposition coming from Pe-asco-area residents who argue the expansion interferes with former land grant lands and could limit access to traditional lands.

The survey of 300 Taos County voters was conducted in August and asked a series of questions related to public lands and wilderness. According to pollster Stephen Clermont with Virginia-based Third Eye Strategies, those surveyed voiced “overwhelming support” for protecting public lands, with around three-quarters of respondents saying they’ve camped or hiked on public lands in the last three years.

Asked whether they would favor or oppose legislation to protect the wilderness areas surrounding the Pecos (meaning current roadless areas that lack official wilderness designation), 72 percent of respondents said they would support such an effort.

The existing Pecos Wilderness encompasses around 224,000 acres across the Carson and Santa Fe national forests. For years, wilderness proponents, including the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and The Wilderness Society, have been pushing a campaign to designate around 120,000 acres on the periphery as wilderness or “special management areas,” which can restrict commercial development while potentially allowing motorized access and other activities banned in wilderness.

The survey results, combined with a slew of conservation successes in recent years, suggests to wilderness advocates that there is broad support for the Pecos expansion initiative.

“Taos County has become a national model for its proud tradition of public lands,” said Ernie Atencio, a Hondo Mesa resident and board member of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, in a news release. “It isn’t surprising that [Taos County residents] want to safeguard the critical watersheds adjacent to the Pecos and to make sure that future generations have the same opportunities for recreation and traditional uses as we have now.”

The goal of the Pecos campaign is to build broad local support before legislation to create new wilderness is introduced in Congress. Objections from locals — especially those on the edges of proposed expansion — could complicate that effort.

The release of the wilderness-friendly poll results comes as the Taos County Commission remains noncommittal on the question of expanding the Pecos. Wilderness advocates have appeared before the commission several times asking for their support, but those meetings have also been attended by dozens of people from the Pe-asco area who question the motives behind the expansion.

County commissioner Candyce O'Donnell, who represents the Pe-asco area and has been an outspoken opponent of the expansion, said the survey results don't sway her. "I question how many people were surveyed in Pe-asco," O'Donnell said. "They are the ones that are directly affected."

Both supporters and critics of the expansion have said they want to "protect" and "preserve" the area, but they disagree on the best way to do it.

To see the complete survey results, find this story at taosnews.com .

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