

U.S. Senate OKs wilderness in Rio Grande del Norte National Monument

Wilderness designation needs further congressional action

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In the halls of Congress Thursday (Dec. 21), the U.S. Senate approved a bill to create wilderness around Ute Mountain and the Rio San Antonio in northern Taos and Rio Arriba counties.

The Cerros del Norte Conservation Act establishes two new wildernesses within the 250,000 acre Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

While public land advocates and New Mexico's senators have been advancing the idea of this wilderness area for years, the Senate's recent approval is only one step. The bill must be approved by the House of Representatives and signed into law by the president before the wilderness is officially designated.

Wilderness areas represent one of the most protected statuses public land can receive in the United States. And unlike a national monument, designating wilderness requires Congressional action. Sen. Martin Heinrich introduced the legislation along with New Mexico's other U.S. senator, Tom Udall. Both are Democrats.

"Designating the Cerro del Yuta and Rio San Antonio areas as wilderness is a final step toward protecting the Rio Grande del Norte's deep heritage, traditional practice and treasured landscapes that Northern New Mexico and countless visitors have cherished for generations," said Udall in a Thursday (Dec. 21) press release.

Though the lands around the Cerros del Norte have not changed substantially in the past 20 years, the government's willingness to consider it wilderness has. During the early 1990s, the Bureau of Land Management recommended the area not be included in the national system of protected public lands although administrators in the agency have repeatedly advocated for its inclusion since then.

"The passage of the Cerros del Norte Bill reflects the value that New Mexicans place on wilderness and wild places," said Stuart Wilde, owner of Wild Earth Llama Adventures, a Taos-based outfitting and guiding company. "In a time when our public lands are under constant threat, this reaffirms our community's commitment to the protection and conservation of our most special places."

The bill, S. 432, designates 13,420 acres of wilderness around Cerro del Yuta (Ute Mountain) near Costilla and another 8,120 acres near the Rio San Antonio in Rio Arriba County — the same as the boundaries proposed in previous versions of this legislation.

New Mexico's senators introduced identical legislation in 2013 and 2015. In February, Heinrich brought the bill to the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, of which he is a member. The bill passed that committee in March.

The Senate approved the bill by a voice vote, meaning the names and numbers of senators voting are not recorded. "The presiding officer states the question, then asks those in favor and against to say 'Yea' or 'Nay,' respectively, and announces the result according to his or her judgment," according to the Senate rules.

Heinrich's bill was one of more than two dozen approved by voice vote. Several bills dealt with wilderness, national parks and other public land designations.

The wilderness areas lie within the national monument, which was under scrutiny by the U.S. Department of Interior during a review of nearly 30 national monuments. President Donald J. Trump ordered the monument review during his early days in office.

The department released the results of that review Dec. 5. Congress was urged to take steps to "examine more appropriate public-land-use designations" for the lands within the Rio Grande del Norte.

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New Mexico's senators introduced legislation in 2013 and 2015 identical to that passed Thursday (Dec. 21), which paves the way for two wilderness areas within the north end of the national monument in Taos County.

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