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## **U.S. Senate approves permanent money for conservation fund**

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**A hiking trail leading down to the Manby Hot Springs runs parallel to the Río Grande within the Río Grande National Monument.**

A sweeping public lands conservation package that passed the U.S. Senate on Feb. 12 with overwhelming support from both parties would establish 13 new wilderness areas in New Mexico, the largest land designation in a single year since 1980.

The Natural Resources Management Act, including 170 bills with provisions reaching into every state, passed on a vote of 92-8.

Together, the measures would permanently reauthorize the popular Land and Water Conservation Fund – which draws revenues for conservation efforts from offshore oil and gas drilling – and protect 1.3 million acres as wilderness, including more than 270,000 acres in New Mexico within the Río Grande del Norte National Monument in Taos County and the Organ Mountains Desert Peaks National Monument in Doña Ana County.

The wilderness designation, which prohibits roads and motorized vehicles, would still allow for recreation, hunting, livestock grazing and law enforcement.

Conservation advocates hailed the bipartisan effort.

“We couldn’t be more thrilled that these special places are one step closer to being protected in their wild and natural states, providing New Mexicans and all Americans with ample opportunities to escape to the outdoors,” said Mark Allison, executive director of New Mexico Wild, in a news release Tuesday.

“Given that New Mexico is home to the nation’s first designated wilderness area, it is gratifying to see that tradition of conservation and responsible stewardship of our public lands continue,” he said.

U.S. Sen. Tom Udall said in a news release that the Land and Water Conservation Fund has “invested over \$312 million to help protect our most cherished public lands, spur job creation and fuel our \$9.9 billion outdoor recreation economy, a key economic driver in the state that employs 99,000 New Mexicans.”

The public lands package has broad support in the House of Representatives, where it faces a vote after the mid-February recess, and White House officials have indicated the president will sign it, according to the Washington Post.

Wilderness preservation has been the subject of ongoing conflict between Democrats and the Trump administration. Environmentalists feared early in President Trump’s term that his administration would reduce wilderness designations in New Mexico, but that didn’t happen.

According to New Mexico Wild, polls conducted in 2016 showed 93 percent of registered voters in Taos County believe wilderness is important to them.

Udall’s news release said lodgers tax revenue in Taos increased by 21 percent a year after designation of the Río Grande del Norte National Monument. “In addition,” the statement said, “gross-receipts revenue to businesses in Taos County in the accommodations and food service sector rose 8.3 percent in the second half of 2013 compared with the same period in 2012.”

Stretching across 379 square miles, the Río Grande del Norte National Monument encompasses the

800 foot deep Río Grande Gorge and the 10,093-foot tall Ute Mountain with trails for hiking, biking and horseback riding.

The public land measures that passed Feb. 12, and earlier iterations, have faced strong support and sponsorship from New Mexico Democrats in Congress, including former Sen. Jeff Bingaman, who introduced legislation in 2009 to create wilderness in Doña Ana County.

A provision in the Natural Resources Management Act would permanently designate watershed management in the Río Puerco Basin, which spans 4.7 million acres in New Mexico. This would continue collaborative effort to restore wetlands areas by resolving flood damage, controlling erosion and increasing vegetation.

A 12-year-old management program for the Río Puerco Basin, critical for flow into the Middle Río Grande Basin, was set to expire in March. The provision to maintain the program was introduced by Udall and fellow U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich.

“By the end of the last century, decades of poor land management and pollution combined with highly erodible soils created immense difficulties all along the Rio Puerco floodplain,” Heinrich, D-N.M., said in a statement.

“With a collaborative, comprehensive approach,” Heinrich added, “it is possible to make real progress in restoring the land and water in this watershed that is so central to communities in Western New Mexico.”