

Seeking wilderness status for 46,000 acres

Groups unite to preserve Columbine-Hondo area

By Matthew van Buren

The Taos News, 11/17/2011

A coalition of citizens and organizations is calling for the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area to receive official wilderness designation.

The area comprises about 46,000 acres, includes Flag Mountain, Lobo Peak and Gold Hill, and sits between the 20,000-acre Latir Wilderness and 19,661-acre Wheeler Peak Wilderness. According to information from the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition, groups including local land grants, acequias, nonprofits, the Taos County Commission, town of Taos, Taos Pueblo and Taos County Chamber of Commerce support its mission of creating the new wilderness. According to information from the coalition, Taos Pueblo War Chief Edwin Concha announced this month that the Tribal Council passed a resolution in support of the issue, and other government officials and nonprofit leaders have also advocated for the wilderness designation.

"It's a broad-based coalition that has a huge amount of support across-the-board," Stuart Wilde, who operates Wild Earth Llama Adventures, said.

Wilde said the wilderness designation would create a region of contiguous protected land from Santa Fe to the Colorado border. He said the effort to get the area designated as wilderness is several years old.

According to information from the coalition, the area has essentially been managed as wilderness since it received the "wilderness study area" designation in 1980 with the passage of the New Mexico Wilderness Act.

"In the past 30 years, it is clear that the area has become even more deserving for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System — ensuring that mining, roads, clear cutting and other industrial development will not scar and diminish this very special place," a coalition release states.

Wilde said the Columbine-Hondo "got stuck in limbo" for the past three decades.

"I've been calling the Columbine 'New Mexico's forgotten wilderness,'" he said.

Wilde said New Mexico's representatives in Washington are largely supportive of the designation.

“This is essentially low-hanging fruit. It’s a non-contentious conservation campaign,” he said. “It’s just about finishing the job.”

Wilde said traditional uses would continue in the area if it were designated wilderness, and the coalition quotes Arroyo Hondo Arriba Community Land Grant President David Argüello as saying the action would help protect the area for future generations.

“We need to make sure that no one can ever destroy our cultural and national heritage here with destructive mining operations, logging or roads,” he said. “This way, we’re protecting the land, our ingress and egress, and preserving our traditional activities such as livestock grazing.”

Questa Mayor Esther Garcia also spoke to the value of the wilderness designation, saying cultural and historical traditions such as horseback riding, fishing, herb gathering and hunting would be preserved.

Wilde said the designation would help keep the area pristine, protecting it from roads and motorized travel, as well as protecting wildlife and water. Wilde said communities including Arroyo Seco and Questa rely on the watershed for a “significant amount” of their fresh water.

“In order to protect your water, you have to protect its source,” he said.

According to information from the coalition, snowmelt from the Columbine-Hondo goes into streams including the Rio Hondo, Red River and Rio Grande.

“Mayordomos from Lama, San Cristòbal, Valdez, Arroyo Hondo and Des Montes divert some of these flowing waters to village acequias that water livestock, orchards and gardens,” the coalition release states. “Protection of these headwaters is vital to the continued viability of our area and the rest of the state.”

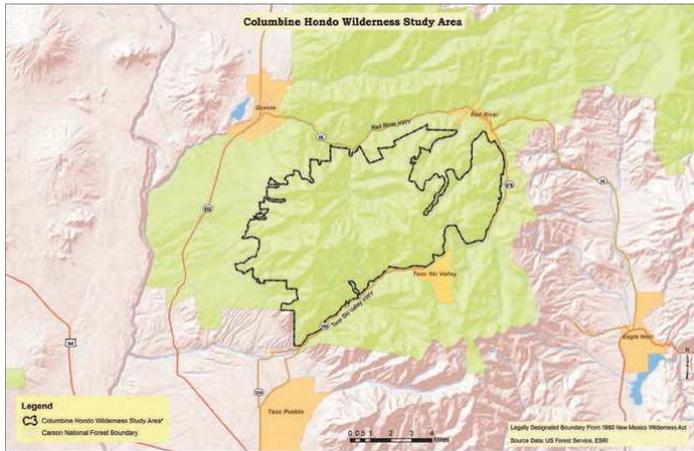
Wilde said the designation also has an economic development aspect, particularly as the state promotes “Ecotourism” in the Taos area. He said Ecotourism provides a sustainable form of economic growth and development that also helps to preserve the area’s natural beauty.

Wilde said U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman may introduce legislation next year — which will be Bingaman’s last in Congress — to confer the wilderness designation on the Columbine-Hondo.

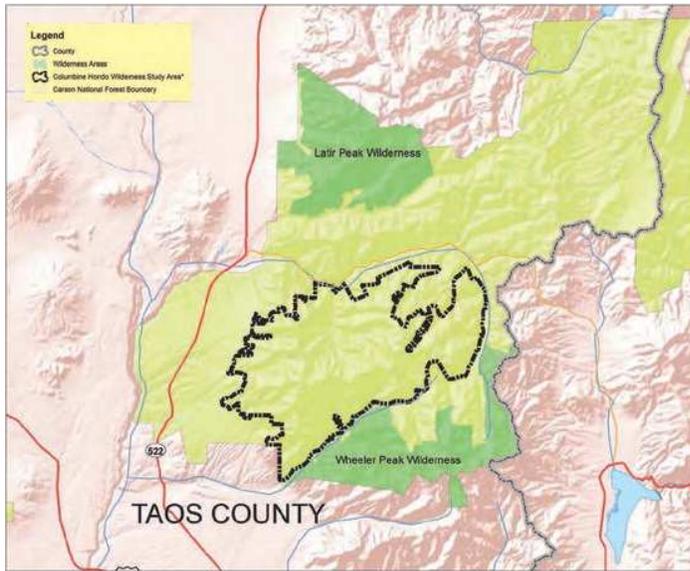
“Conservation is an issue that everybody can really get behind,” Wilde said. “We all care about clean water, clean air, protecting our watersheds.”



A coalition of local residents and organizations is working together to preserve the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area.



This map depicts the boundary of the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area being proposed for formal wilderness designation.



This map shows the current and proposed wilderness areas in Taos County.