

EDITORIAL

Keeping our wilderness areas wild and scenic

It's becoming rare to find places in this nation that haven't been touched by people and their schemes.

That's why we need to protect them.

A case in point is the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area located in the northern part of our county.

The area comprises about 46,000 untouched acres sitting between two significant wilderness areas: Latir and Wheeler Peak. Among its features are Flag Mountain, Lobo Peak and Gold Hill.

Columbine-Hondo was established as a wilderness study area in 1980. Now, a coalition of local environmental groups and governments, including Taos Pueblo and Taos County, is asking the federal government to make the wilderness designation permanent.

So what does a wilderness designation mean? Mining, roads, clear-cutting of the forests and other development would be prohibited.

But traditional forest uses such as fishing, herb gathering, hunting, horseback riding, and hiking would still be permitted.

Forever.

Though management of the Columbine-Hondo would not change substantially, the permanency of the protection Congress can bestow on that remarkable area is certainly worth seeking, particularly while wilderness supporter U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, is still in office.

Think of the environmental benefits that permanent protection for the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area would have, such as ensuring clean water for large portions of the county.

As Questa Mayor Esther Garc'a told a reporter, "In order to protect your water, you have to protect its source."

Besides environmental concerns, increasing our permanent wilderness acreage would be a boost for eco-tourism businesses that give their customers something they might not have back home — a truly wild place.

New Mexico was the first state to have a formally designated wilderness area when it preserved the then-750,000-acre Gila Wilderness in 1924. Since then, the state has lagged behind Western states in preservation but has added an additional 901,360 acres.

Bingaman is expected to introduce legislation to protect Columbine-Hondo next year, in his last year in office before he retires. Its passage would be a fitting way to mark the end his long service to Northern New Mexico.

We are also heartened that the R'o Grande del Norte Conservation Area Establishment Act is making progress at the federal level. That project has so much going for it, including the creation of two more wilderness areas near Taos. That effort has similar local support, which is necessary for these types of initiatives to move through Congress.

The Taos News has printed numerous letters and op-ed pieces supporting the preservation of the Columbine-Hondo and R'o Grande del Norte areas.

We, too, support the preservation of both.

These are clean, wild places to visit and enjoy. Let's keep them that way.