

## **Cyclists seek access to Columbine-Hondo trails**

**By Matthew van Buren**

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Cyclists are seeking to have part of the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area set aside for mountain biking, but they are meeting with resistance from some wilderness seekers.

The Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Coalition has been working for years toward a full Congressional wilderness designation for the 46,000-acre area, located between the Latir and Wheeler Peak wildernesses. The Columbine-Hondo was designated a wilderness study area in 1980, and the coalition has gathered hundreds of letters of support from local individuals, organizations and governmental bodies.

However, the federal Wilderness Act prohibits the use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment and other forms of “mechanical transport” — including bicycles — in designated wildernesses. The Taos Cycling Coalition is requesting that approximately 19 percent of the Columbine-Hondo, including parts of the Bull-of-the-Woods, Long Canyon, Gold Hill and Goose Creek trails be designated a National Recreation Area that would allow cycling.

The Cycling Coalition has been collecting its own supporters and meeting with the Wilderness Coalition, the Forest Service and others in its effort to set aside certain trails in the eastern Columbine-Hondo for mountain biking. Among supporters is the Village of Taos Ski Valley.

After being approached by the Cycling Coalition, Village of Taos Ski Valley Mayor Neal King sent a Nov. 22 letter to Bingham clarifying the village’s position. The village had supported full wilderness designation but came to believe “a balance can easily be struck” to allow mountain biking in part of the Columbine-Hondo. According to King’s letter, mountain biking has had a “minimum impact” on the area, and the village supports the concept of a “companion designation.”

“Please understand that the Village of Taos Ski Valley doesn’t support a National Recreation Area designation that would encompass the entire Wilderness Study Area, nor does the Village of Taos Ski Valley support any other designations that would allow motorized, logging or other activities,” the letter states.

Cycling supporters Sean Cassily and Charlie McGarity addressed the Taos County Commission, Dec. 6, asking for the county’s support for a “companion designation.” The commission passed a resolution in support of the wilderness designation nearly a year ago. Cassily told the commission mountain bikes are not detrimental to the land, wildlife or trails and have a positive economic impact.

“It draws people to Taos,” he said.

Cassily said the South Boundary Trail is well-known and brings people to the area for a day, but a National Recreation Area would attract bikers for longer stays, encouraging them to eat, shop and stay in local hotels. He also argued that mountain biking is more popular with today's youth than hiking, and in order to raise future conservationists it is important to get young people into nature with fun, engaging activities.

"We want to protect our ecosystem," he said.

Cassily also spoke to cyclists' efforts to maintain trails, including clearing downed trees and ensuring storm water drains properly.

Wilderness Coalition members also spoke at the commission meeting, saying mountain biking has never been legally sanctioned in the Wilderness Study Area. Peggy Nelson said there are "dangers" in changing course from the attempt to get full wilderness designation at this point. She said other groups with new requests could start coming forward during a separate National Recreation Area process. She also said the Wilderness Coalition is working with limited time, as the group is hoping Sen. Jeff Bingaman, DNM, will introduce wilderness legislation for the Columbine-Hondo before he retires at the end of next year.

Wilderness Coalition member and outfitter Stuart Wilde said National Recreation Areas have "much lower levels of protection" than wildernesses, and placing 19 percent of the Wilderness Study Area in a less protected designation would set a "dangerous precedent."

Commissioners suggested the cycling and wilderness coalitions continue to work on a joint proposal before coming before the county again. County Manager Jacob Caldwell, who told the commission he is a mountain biker himself, said the commission could meet for a work-study session sometime in the future if it would care to reconsider the county's position.

"There is a real need for some compromise here," he said.

#### 'Unintended consequence'

International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) Public Lands Initiative Director Ashley Kornblat warned against "throwing the baby out with the bath water" by excluding bicycles from the Columbine-Hondo. She said in the creation of many wildernesses, the closure of bike trails is a "side effect" or "unintended consequence."

"There are places where the need for this additional protection has nothing to do with protecting against bicycles," she said. "The issue here is not that bicycles are hurting the land ... When the Wilderness Act was created, mountain bikes didn't exist."

Kornblat said laws can be tailored to give a piece of land all the protections of a wilderness but still allow mountain bikes.

"When you write the legislation, you take care of that," she said. "You can write in whatever protection you want."

The IMBA also argues for allowing mountain biking on economic grounds. According to a 2006 study conducted by the Outdoor Foundation and publicized by IMBA, cycling contributes more than \$6 billion annually to the economy of the Rocky Mountain region, including \$3.7 billion in bicycling trip related expenditures.

Taos Cyclery owner Doug Pickett said most cyclists visit Taos to ride the South Boundary Trail, but cycling in the Taos Ski Valley area is unique in the state because of the views.

"It's one of three areas that I send visitors who come to Taos who we're trying to get to stay for more than just an afternoon or a day," he said. "I always recommend the Long Canyon ride because it's the most scenic mountain biking in all of New Mexico."

### 'Fighting the same fight'

Members of both coalitions have said they see themselves as essentially advocating for the same thing: protecting the Columbine-Hondo in perpetuity. Kornblat said such efforts need as many people behind them as possible.

"You need a broad coalition to pass a wilderness bill," she said.

Pickett said he believes the National Recreation Area companion designation is a viable, realistic alternative to full wilderness designation. He also said he sees the Cycling Coalition as more of an ally than an obstacle to the Wilderness Coalition's goal of protecting the Columbine-Hondo.

"We're really fighting the same fight," he said.

Wilderness Coalition member and Rivers and Birds executive director Roberta Salazar said she has similar sentiments.

"I think (mountain biking) is an important opportunity for outdoor recreation," she said.

She said she has had good discussions with the Cycling Coalition. However, she said she still hopes the Columbine-Hondo will be designated as a wilderness in its entirety, with the support of cyclists.

"We are going for the strictest protection for the greatest amount of land," she said.

Wilde also said he sees cyclists as allies in protecting the land, adding that he is a big supporter of the sport of cycling. He said he views the cycling community as allies in conservation, "as most mountain bikers are conscientious, considerate, and supporters of wilderness values."

However, Wilde said he hopes the Cycling Coalition will come to throw its weight behind full wilderness designation for the Columbine-Hondo. He said wilderness supporters have a "small window of opportunity" to accomplish their goal.

"My hope is that these guys will see the urgency to it," he said. "There's pretty much overwhelming support for this."

Wilde said both coalitions see the Columbine-Hondo as a special resource that is worth protecting.

"That's something we can all agree on," he said.

## 'Gray area'

Cassily said Wilderness Study Areas all over the country face similar problems, and mountain biking is a "gray area" here and elsewhere. He said mountain bikers had accessed the area until last summer, when they were told it was illegal.

Carson National Forest spokeswoman Kathy DeLucas said the confusion was mainly due to a "time warp" between the Wilderness Study Area designation and the influx of mountain bikes. She said it wasn't an issue in the 1980s because there weren't mountain bikes around, but because Wilderness Study Areas are managed as wildernesses mechanized vehicles are illegal.

"We're trying to work with them to come up with alternative areas," she said.

She said the Forest Service has tried to sign the area to let bikers know they shouldn't ride trails in the Columbine-Hondo. DeLucas also said those at the National Forest are hopeful Bingaman will introduce wilderness legislation before he retires.

"It's been 30 years, for crying out loud," she said.

Wilde said the urgency for wilderness designation is intensified by H.R. 1581, the Wilderness and Roadless Area Release Act of 2011. The Act was introduced by U.S. Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-CA, and cosponsored by Rep. Steve Pearce, R-NM, among others. Wilde said releasing Wilderness Study Areas from wilderness protection could open them up to "motorized access, timber sales, mining and other forms of development."

"Senator Bingaman is leaving office next year, and there may not be another chance to see this New Mexico treasure permanently protected for future generations," Wilde wrote in an email to *The Taos News*.

"The Columbine-Hondo is truly under threat, and the time is now to seek wilderness designation for this special place."

According to a statement from Bingaman's office, he is "focusing his attention on his bill currently before Congress to designate the R'o Grande del Norte National Conservation Area, and is working hard to pass that legislation during the 112th Congress."

"There is clearly support for the proposed Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Area, and he will be taking a closer look at it in the year ahead," the statement reads.

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