

MY TURN

Keep biking where it has historically been allowed

DOUG PICKETT

The Columbine Hondo Wilderness Study Area is moving closer to becoming a designated Wilderness Area.

This is good as it will give this pristine piece of forest everlasting protection from those interests that may be less than favorable to the general public. It will also end a 30-year journey from National Forest to Wilderness Area. A lot has changed in 30 years. We carry our phones wherever we go, we get movies sent directly to our homes via satellite, and people started riding mountain bikes. Once the Columbine-Hondo is designated Wilderness, mountain bikes will no longer be allowed there.

That means there will be limited public mountain biking access from the south boundary of Taos Pueblo, just north of highway 64, to areas north of Questa. These include some roads and trails in Valle Vidal.

This is a long way to drive to access some intermediate riding.

Mountain bikes have existed in a gray area of not being encouraged to ride in the Wilderness Study Area and not being forbidden by the Forest Service either. In the meantime, they have established a historical precedence on trails like Long Canyon and sections of the Columbine-Hondo National Recreation Area (Gold Hill Trail) out of Taos Ski Valley, and Goose Creek Trail out of Red River.

These areas will be permanently effected by the elimination of mountain biking.

The Taos Cycling Coalition is a group of concerned mountain bikers who have proposed an alternative to the Wilderness Act as it is currently written.

We would like to designate 19 percent of the Wilderness Study Area boundary as National Recreation Area (NRA). This area would include the above trails, leaving the remainder as designated Wilderness.

An NRA is established by local interests to create a protected area, just like a Wilderness Area, but would allow human powered transportation. Our research shows these to be just as effective and sound as designated Wilderness but more versatile to local needs.

We feel that with sound guidance the NRA can provide a solution that is not only environmentally comprehensive but will also benefit the entire area economically with healthy recreation. This area is not only accessible by local youth on mountain bikes, as well as adults,

but is encouraged to be experienced by visitors alike bringing their bikes to Taos and looking for a variety of places to ride.

With more options to provide these visitors they will be more likely to stay in our hotels, restaurants, and shops.

During prime summer and fall cycling seasons I field calls daily from visitors who want to know where to ride, sleep, and eat. This doesn't include the numerous emails received from potential riders and groups scouting the area for future trips.

The South Boundary Trail is nationally renowned for a ride you don't want to miss. In an effort to give these visiting mountain bikers some options and a reason to spend more than a day in Taos, I suggest the riding out of Taos Ski Valley primarily for its beauty and a Rio Grande Gorge ride as it is unique to this area.

Without the high elevation riding in the Wilderness Study Area we are left with one less option.

Not only does Taos Ski Valley and Red River provide special riding opportunities for all mountain bikers, the amenities are alluring as well. Both areas provide post ride dining, lodging, and entertainment.

There's nothing better than finishing a great ride with a green chile cheeseburger and cold beverage. Lodging allows the family to stay where they play. The rider can go for a mountain bike excursion while the hiker, disc golfer, or sun lounger all do their thing.

Both areas provide outdoor festivals and entertainment such as beer festivals, barn dances, and various live shows throughout the summer and fall seasons. The message is clear "come here, stay, come back and tell your friends."

The Taos Cycling Coalition is not interested in blocking the Wilderness designation process, but rather preserving mountain biking in an area where it has historically been allowed. The NRA provides a solution that we can all live with, especially local youth mountain bikers who would be denied access in this area which is arguably the most scenic in all of New Mexico.

Doug Pickett is owner of Taos Cyclery in Taos, N.M. He has been a bike commuter, mountain biker, and road rider for 27 years. He has worked in the bicycle industry for 20 years.