

Will more wild be called 'wilderness?'

Groups seeking substantial protection for lands in Gore Range, north of Vail, near Camp Hale and south of Edwards

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VAIL — If you're in an area deemed "wilderness," you're in a really special place, said Chuck Ogilby, a longtime Vail resident.

"It makes an area absolutely pristine, and that is such an incredibly rare thing in the world today," he said.

There's plenty of wild land around Eagle County — 85 percent of the county is public land. But that land — including its wildlife and water — can still face threats, whether it's logging, mining or snowmobiles.

Wilderness designation helps protect land from those threats. Three such areas are already in the county: The Eagles Nest Wilderness encompasses the Gore Range, the Holy Cross Wilderness covers more than 100,000 acres around Mount of the Holy Cross, and a small portion of the Flat Tops Wilderness is in the county.

Wilderness areas ban snowmobiles and mountain bikes and limit mining and logging.

Ogilby said he supports the creation of more "wilderness" around Eagle County, and a new campaign is trying to do just that. Three regional groups are eyeing 670,000 acres in the White River National Forest for the "wilderness area" designation. Much of that land is in Eagle County.

"We're kind of surrounded by the sights and sounds of urban life," said Clare Bastable of the Colorado Mountain Club. "The opportunity to kind of get away from our day jobs and vehicles, our urban lives, to be able to get solitude, those opportunities are diminishing as Colorado gets more and more developed.

"Wilderness offers the ultimate opportunity to seek quiet, to seek solitude, to reconnect with nature."

What 'wilderness' is

- Protected from logging roads, dams and other permanent structures.
- Protected from commercial timber cutting.
- Motor vehicles, such as snowmobiles and ATVs, are prohibited, as are "mechanized" vehicles such as mountain bikes.
- New mining claims and mineral leasing are prohibited. (Mining and grazing that are happening when the area is designated wilderness are allowed to continue.)

The land eyed for "wilderness" in White River National Forest includes 1,310 acres on Freeman Creek north of Vail.

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Headed to Congress

The plan, called the Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign, is now a draft, and the organizers are asking community members for input. The Wilderness Workshop, the Colorado Mountain Club and the Colorado Environmental Coalition are spearheading the campaign.

“We’re trying to sit down with those folks and get a sense of how our proposal looks,” said Lisa Smith of the Colorado Environmental Coalition.

Once it’s completed, the plan will have to get approval from Congress.

Sloan Shoemaker, director of the Wilderness Workshop, said the campaign organizers have been talking to the state’s congressional delegation, and are optimistic about Congress’ willingness to approve new wilderness.

“There might be more openness to wilderness than there has been previously,” he said.

But it’s important that the effort starts with citizens, Shoemaker said.

“Congress doesn’t act on agency recommendations,” he said. “They act on the will of the constituents.”

Piney, Castle Peak, Lake Creek

Areas in Eagle County targeted in the campaign include:

- Land stretching from Camp Hale to Copper Mountain and Shrine Mountain near Vail Pass.
- Land around Spraddle Creek, west of Bald Mountain, just above Vail. Spraddle Creek Road and the road up to the Eiseman Hut are excluded.
- More than 20,000 acres along the Piney River, eight miles northeast of Wolcott.
- More than 16,000 acres around Castle Peak north of Eagle.
- About 3,500 acres between Bellyache Mountain and West Lake Creek south of Edwards.
- More than 14,000 acres stretching from Polar Star Inn south of Eagle south to the North Fork of the Fryingpan River.
- A long strip of land totaling 3,108 acres that runs along the north side of the interstate from East Vail to Officer’s Gulch.

While the plan proposes 670,000 acres for wilderness in the White River National Forest, the Forest Service has recommended just 82,000 acres for that designation.

Sally Spaulding, spokesman for the White River National Forest, said too much wilderness might take away “semi-primitive wilderness,” the area between pristine forest and towns.

“That sort of place is what we’re concerned with losing with this larger proposal,” she said.

On the Web

For more information on the current draft of the plan, go to whiteriverwild.org

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