

New national forest parcels proposed for highest level of protection

By [BY Bob Berwyn](#)
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SUMMIT COUNTY — A grassroots push to add big chunks of wilderness to the White River National Forest will continue this summer with a series of hikes aimed at informing citizens about the wilderness values of the areas under consideration.

“We are looking to get people on the ground as a way to get them excited about these areas,” said Lisa Smith, one of the coordinators of Hidden Gems wilderness campaign. “We’re hoping that people will tell their friends, and we’ll encourage them to write to their congressman and the county commissioners,” Smith said.

A coalition of conservation groups began mapping out the wilderness proposal last year after doing an inventory of roadless national forest lands adjacent to existing wilderness areas.

The Forest Service also studied potential new wilderness designations as part of the White River forest plan update, completed in 2002. The forest plan identifies about 80,000 acres of land as suitable for wilderness designation, but the wilderness advocates say there is much more land on the White River forest that qualify for wilderness status.

“We did the same suitability and availability studies, but came to a different conclusion,” Smith said.

Forest Service rangers expressed little enthusiasm for the plan, citing the wilderness recommendations included in recent update of the forest plan. But Smith said the agency has been providing data about use and conditions of the proposed areas that will be helpful in shaping the citizen proposal.

Much existing wilderness terrain is in the high altitude rock and ice zone, encompassing spectacular scenery and craggy peaks. The Hidden Gems plan focuses more attention on mid-elevation territory, critical for wildlife.

Not everyone is thrilled by the idea of expanding the wilderness zone. On its web site, the Summit County Off Road Riders — representing motorized users — is calling on members to rally against the effort to convert national forest lands to wilderness.

“We don’t have an official stance yet,” said Chuck Ginsburg, the group’s president. “Most of this is not going to affect off-road motorized use, but it will have significant impacts to snowmobile use,” Ginsburg said. The motorized group is planning to take a closer look at the wilderness plan this summer, he said.

Local mountain bikers also have some concerns. The early draft versions of the wilderness maps included some areas with popular mountain bike trails.

Since then, the wilderness coalition has revised the maps to remove a few areas, including the northern portion of the proposed Hoosier Ridge wilderness area, near Breckenridge, as well as the south side of Vail Pass, Smith said.

“We thought it was prime lynx habitat, but it's not. The lynx habitat is adjacent to that area,” she said.

Smith said she'll work closely with the Summit Fat Tire Society and the Summit county Off Road Riders to address specific concerns. She plans to ride some of the trails in question before developing the final maps.

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