

THE ASPEN TIMES

Coalition hopes to add 700,000 acres of wilderness in Colorado

Hidden Gems campaign pushes designation for more lands

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March 10, 2008

CARBONDALE — It's been 28 years since a significant chunk of national forest surrounding Aspen received Wilderness designation. Environmentalists hope to end that dry spell soon with protection for hundreds of thousands of additional acres.

Carbondale-based Wilderness Workshop is helping lead the Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign. The ambitious plan would add roughly 700,000 acres of wilderness in the White River and Gunnison National Forests.

To put the plan into perspective, the sprawling White River National Forest has about 2.3 million acres. Of that, 750,000 acres already has the wilderness designation, which prohibits mechanized uses such as off-road vehicles, snowmobiles and mountain bikes. Wilderness lands also are off limits from mining and natural gas exploration, but grazing is allowed.

Some of the most spectacular land surrounding Aspen has been preserved as wilderness for up to 44 years. About 78,000 acres surrounding the stunning Maroon Bells were protected when U.S. Congress passed the Wilderness Act in 1964. That Wilderness Area was expanded to 181,117 acres in 1980.

Other high peaks surrounding the Roaring Fork Valley were protected in the late 1970s and 1980, including: 74,000 acres in the Hunter-Fryingpan; 166,938 in the Collegiate Peaks; 235,406 acres in the Flat Tops; and 64,992 acres in the Raggeds. Many of those wilderness areas spill into other national forests.

The Hunter-Fryingpan Wilderness Area was expanded by 8,000 acres in 1993.

More than 'rock and ice'

Those actions preserved land that is mostly at higher elevations, referred to by environmentalists as "rock and ice." The mining and logging industries along with other interests battled in the early days to prevent lower-elevation lands from gaining protections that would lock them out.

"Rock and ice was the low-hanging fruit," said Wilderness Workshop's Dave Reed. "There was less conflict."

Now, the White River Wilderness Coalition wants to add to the legacy and add middle-elevation lands that are

The Hidden Gems campaign proposes to designate 21,470 acres of Basalt Mountain as wilderness. (Courtesy Wilderness Workshop)



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more ecologically diverse and provide critical habitat for wildlife. They have dubbed those targeted areas “The Hidden Gems.”

The lands they are eyeing are spread over five Colorado counties, two Congressional districts and two national forests.

Winning support — or, more accurately, reducing conflicts — for adding the wilderness won’t happen overnight. “This could be a two-, three-, four-year campaign,” said Sloan Shoemaker, executive director of Wilderness Workshop.

Eliminating conflicts

A poll conducted last year in Colorado showed there is “overwhelming” support for adding wilderness, Shoemaker said. The environmental coalition needs to identify those supporters and harness them.

“The people who object are coming out first,” he said.

Negotiations will be required to work out differences, for example, with mountain bikers over the proposal’s effects on trails in the Hunter Creek area. The Hidden Gems proposal targets 8,944 acres on the Hunter Creek Valley side of Smuggler Mountain for wilderness. The proposed boundary lines avoid the most popular mountain bike routes, but some trails would be affected.

Elsewhere around Aspen, the proposal would add 2,710 acres identified as North Independent, on the steep slopes north of Highway 82 as it climbs to Independence Pass.

In the midvalley, the Gems proposal would add 21,470 acres of Basalt Mountain to wilderness. Again, proponents avoided routes popular with cyclists and dirt bikers. Shoemaker said he is optimistic that compromises can be reached with foes, without gutting the wilderness plan. “There aren’t barriers that we can’t overcome,” he said.

Key ingredient for legislators

Reducing conflicts will be essential to earning Congressional approval for additional wilderness, said Doug Scott, policy director for an organization called Campaign for America’s Wilderness. The organization advises and provides expertise to small, grassroots wilderness advocates across the country. They have lawyers and Washington, D.C., lobbyists to provide help.

Scott spent two days last week in Carbondale at a summit with key players in the Hidden Gems campaign, sharing his experiences and discussing how they could be applied. “You don’t need to reinvent the wheel in Carbondale,” he said.

While there is a lot of work required, it boils down to taking the steps necessary to make Colorado Congressional delegation comfortable, Scott said.

“Typically, wilderness bills pass when an awful lot of the conflicts have been worked out,” he said.

Scott’s advice to the coalition working on the Hidden Gems is to take whatever time is necessary to work out potential conflicts because legislators will introduce a wilderness bill they feel is controversial.

“It’s complete when it’s completed to their satisfaction, not ours,” Scott said. “It’s their legislation.”

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