



Chunks of wilderness eyed for designation

Plan could add 30,000 acres in Summit County, including Hoosier Pass and Tenmile areas

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SUMMIT COUNTY - A plan to add significant new chunks of wilderness in Summit County is taking shape behind the scenes, as a coalition of advocacy groups tries to get buy-in from key stakeholders. Under the hidden gems proposal, Summit could get nearly 30,000 acres of new wilderness, including a huge 13,000-acre parcel spanning some of the most rugged high country in the Tenmile Range from Quandary Peak south to Copper Mountain.

Other areas eyed in Summit County include Corral Creek, near Vail Pass, Hoosier Ridge, south of Breckenridge, a Ptarmigan Peak wilderness expansion, and a northern addition to the Eagles Nest Wilderness on Eliot Ridge.

The Carbondale-based Wilderness Workshop, the Colorado Environmental Coalition and the Colorado Mountain Club have been collaborating on the plan, which already includes a detailed set of maps and geographic information posted on the Wilderness Workshop web site.

Some of the early talks have focused on gauging interest from the U.S. Forest Service, which administers designated wilderness areas, as well as the Colorado congressional delegation, which would instigate any move to add wilderness. Formal wilderness designation can only come from an act of Congress.

Wilderness proponents are also talking with the Boulder-based International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) in hopes of getting support, said Wilderness Workshop director Sloan Shoemaker.

In all, the proposal would add about 670,000 acres of wilderness in and around the White River National Forest, with a few pieces of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land and adjacent national forests also under consideration.

"There is an interest in the delegation in a way we haven't seen before," Shoemaker said, singling out Congressman Mark Udall as a wilderness champion.

'Citizens make wilderness'

"It offers the most enduring protection for public lands," Shoemaker said, explaining the push to add more terrain to a land-management category that aims for the highest level of conservation, leaving land and water pristine, and "untrammelled" by human impacts.

The 2002 update of the White River National Forest plan identified about 80,000 acres of land as suitable for wilderness designation. Forest planner Wendy Haskins said the agency is sticking with the plan.

"From an agency standpoint, all we are recommending is 80,000 acres," Haskins said. She explained that the agency can't trigger a congressional wilderness designation with a forest plan, but that Colorado's federal lawmakers are aware of the recommendation.

In the meantime, the White River forest manages those 80,000 acres to preserve the wilderness characteristics.

In reality, the push for more wilderness usually comes from grassroots efforts.

"Citizens make wilderness," Shoemaker said. The wilderness proposal in the White River forest plan falls well short of identifying all the area that truly qualify for the status, Shoemaker said.

In all, the 2.3 million acre forest encompasses about 1.1 million acres of roadless lands that could qualify as wilderness, said Shoemaker.

"We want to put out there the true extent of what we think should be wilderness," he said. By compromising during the White River forest planning process, wilderness advocates ended selling themselves - and the wilderness - short, Shoemaker said.

Compromises

Some of the Summit County parcels included in the tentative proposals are currently open to motorized use, while others include popular mountain bike trails.

"We are talking to different stakeholders. In your neck of the woods, that means mountain bikers," Shoemaker said. Developing a wilderness proposal that gets support from the mountain bike community means getting to a nitty-gritty level, he said.

"It's one of those things where we look at in detail, trail by trail," Shoemaker said. As it stands now, the boundary of the proposed Tenmile wilderness was shifted to reflect mountain bike use on the Wheeler Trail.

"We've been involved since early summer," said IMBA policy analyst Drew Vankat. The wilderness advocacy groups approached the mountain bike organization with the proposal to get feedback on potential issues with popular mountain bike routes. At this point, his group is still in a fact-finding stage, Vankat said. Based on similar discussions in other areas, Vankat said he is hopeful there will be a compromise solution.

For more information

For site specific Summit County information on the wilderness proposal see <http://www.whiteriverwild.org/> and choose the proposal pull-down menu.

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