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Poll says residents support wilderness designations

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A coalition of environmental groups is touting a recent poll that found strong support for wilderness areas throughout Colorado. That support was stronger on the Western Slope than on the Front Range, and it was stronger still in the region surrounding the White River National Forest.

"People want more wilderness," said Sloan Shoemaker, executive director of the Wilderness Workshop, one of the groups that contracted the poll. "Most people think there's not enough. They want more. They want it in or near their counties."

The poll, conducted in May by Talmey-Drake Research & Strategy Inc., found most Colorado voters favor additional wilderness designation on federal lands in the state. That support was shared throughout the state, across party lines, by both men and women, and is nearly identical whether respondents hunt, fish or recreate in other ways.

It was commissioned by the Colorado Environmental Coalition, The Wilderness Society and Wilderness Workshop.

"You used to hear the charge that the only people that support wilderness in Colorado are the effete, latte-sipping urbanities, because it's in somebody else's backyard," Shoemaker said. "Clearly there's been a shift and that's flipped on its head."

The poll found 70 percent of Western Slope respondents favored wilderness-quality lands in or near their county. Ninety percent of respondents statewide said wilderness areas are economically important for hunting, fishing and tourism.

The poll also quizzed voters about their feelings about wilderness protections versus energy development. Statewide, 71 percent of respondents felt wilderness-quality lands are more important for recreation, tourism and wildlife than for energy development. The same percentage said wilderness areas shouldn't be sacrificed for energy development. Sixty-four percent said they favored protections for 1 million acres of Bureau of Land Management lands.

"Wilderness and our love of the outdoors is something that has always brought Coloradans [sic] together," said Rep. Diana DeGette, D, in a prepared statement. DeGette has previously proposed a sweeping wilderness bill that would have included some BLM lands. "This poll shows Coloradans [sic] overwhelmingly support protecting wild lands and preserving what is special about Colorado for future generations."

The poll comes as the Wilderness Workshop unveils a proposal to nearly double wilderness protections for land in the White River National Forest and surrounding BLM lands. Its proposal would add wilderness designation to some 650,000 additional acres.

"I think these poll results should certainly give us encouragement," Shoemaker said.

The poll is based on 617 random telephone surveys with Colorado residents conducted from May 1-14.

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