

SUMMIT DAILY NEWS

Wilderness areas outreach continues

Off-roaders concerned about potential loss of access

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SUMMIT COUNTY — A draft plan to add up to 30,000 acres on new wilderness in Summit County got mixed reception from a small group of motorized off-road users last week.

The Hidden Gems proposal would improve connectivity between important wildlife areas and protect some mid-elevation terrain in addition to the existing rock and ice wilderness.

But Chuck Ginsberg, president of the Summit County Off-Road Riders (SCORR) said the plan requires careful scrutiny to ensure that four-wheelers, ATV enthusiasts and dirt bikers don't lose any existing access.

Ginsberg said he needs to take a closer look at the draft maps to identify specific areas of concern. But in general, he said motorized users are feeling squeezed from all directions.

"We get black-balled. Nobody wants motorized users their back yard," Ginsberg said. "Naturally we're concerned that we're going to lose some terrain," Ginsberg said. "From the point of view of closing down areas (to motorized use), we'll have to look closely and see how the proposal impacts our dwindling privileges," he added.

But at this point, those concerns don't translate to blanket opposition. Ginsberg said he could support some new wilderness if it doesn't reduce access to areas now open to motorized use.

Lisa Smith, advocating for the wilderness plan on behalf of the Colorado Environmental Coalition, presented the plan to a small group of off-roaders last week. Smith said the meeting went OK, and that she plans to return to address a larger group of motorized users at a future SCORR meeting.

Smith said the emphasis on this stage is on grassroots collaboration with all user groups to develop a proposal with broad-based buy-in. In some cases, that will mean looking at the proposed wilderness additions trail by trail with stakeholder groups to determine potential impacts to existing uses.

Two riders from Summit County Off-Road Riders (SCORR) serve as lead marshals during a recent Summit Mountain Challenge race in Breckenridge. The local club is one of the groups included in an outreach effort toward motorized trail users, as local wilderness areas could be added or amended based on a number of proposals.

Summit Daily file photo/Mark Fox



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A similar process is under way with local mountain bikers, Smith said after presenting the Hidden Gems plan at an organizational meeting of the Summit Fat Tire Society earlier this month.

Several popular mountain bike routes have already been carved out of the proposal, and Smith said input from cyclists and motorized users will help shape the final version of the plan.

As outlined in a set of draft maps, the proposal would add significant chunks of wilderness south of Breckenridge, straddling Highway 9 along the Tenmile Range (13,000 acres) and Hoosier Ridge (8,300 acres).

Another big parcel (10,000 acres) could be added on the upper reaches of Tenderfoot Mountain, from Arapahoe Basin up toward Loveland Pass and on to the Eisenhower Tunnel. This area would help protect a wildlife land bridge across Interstate 70, the only place along the I-70 corridor where animals can cross the highway unimpeded.

Other additions are proposed for the Williams Fork Range (8,700 acres), expanding the existing Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness Area, and for the area north of I-70 between Copper Mountain and Vail.

Smith will present the plan at an upcoming Friends of the Lower Blue meeting. Eventually, the wilderness advocates will take their plan to the Board of County Commissioners and to Colorado's congressional delegation.

Wilderness can only be designated by an act of Congress, though the process is often driven by citizen involvement.

A potential political shift at the national level also helped determine the timing of the current push, with advocates guessing that a Democratic Congress and administration might be more friendly toward the plan than the current administration.

Some polling suggests there is widespread support for new wilderness in Colorado. About 75 percent of Colorado residents agree that wilderness quality lands are more important for recreation, tourism and wildlife than for energy development and motorized recreation, according to surveys done by the Colorado Environmental Coalition.

West Slope support was especially strong, with about 70 percent of the region's residents favoring designation of wilderness quality federal lands in or near the counties where they live.

For detailed information and maps, go to <http://www.wildernessworkshop.org/> and click on the Hidden Gems link.

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