



## New group pushing for more wilderness areas in Colorado

### *Several wilderness proposals in Gunnison County*

By Evan Dawson, Crested Butte News  
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A new conservation group based in Pitkin County hopes to create more designated wilderness areas in the state, and a few of their proposed areas lie in Gunnison County.

The Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign has targeted more than 600,000 acres of Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands across the state for potential wilderness designation.

Wilderness designation is the strongest form of protection for untamed landscapes on public lands. It takes an act of Congress to designate public lands as Wilderness, and the Hidden Gems Campaign is working closely with state officials and legislators to put more wilderness areas on the map.

"We are putting together a proposal to be introduced for legislation this fall," says Wendy McDermott, the Hidden Gems campaign coordinator for the Gunnison Valley.

The Hidden Gems Campaign, which has identified more than 40 hidden backcountry gems in six counties, has been under way for two years now and was started by the Carbondale-based organization Wilderness Workshop.

While most of the Hidden Gems proposals lie close to the White River National Forest and Pitkin County, there are several proposals in the Gunnison area.

The Gunnison County proposal areas include a 3,866-acre addition to Treasure Mountain and the existing Raggeds Wilderness; a 6,878-acre addition to the existing West Elk Wilderness; a 3,388-acre addition to the existing Powderhorn Wilderness Area; and 59,395 acres in the Clear Fork Divide that would be part of the brand new Clear Fork Wilderness Area.

High Country Citizens' Alliance (HCCA) interim director Dan Morse says, "I think in general these areas are good candidates for wilderness. They don't have uses that would preclude wilderness and are used generally as wilderness already."

However, Morse says there is currently some interest in oil and gas development near the Clear Fork Divide that could complicate wilderness designation for that area.

HCCA has endorsed the Hidden Gems Campaign, but Morse says the local conservation group doesn't have any active efforts to designate wilderness in Gunnison County.

Hidden Gems has organized a series of casual hikes in August to encourage the public to visit the proposed wilderness areas in Gunnison County. More information on these hikes can be found at the end of this article.

The campaign also has a group of volunteers who spend time hiking into existing wilderness areas and Hidden Gems targets to check maps and inventory data. McDermott says this, "helps record wilderness quality, helps get the best [map] boundaries possible, and helps us discover any new issues that could jeopardize wilderness designation."

"This is a chance for the backcountry-loving public to hike with a purpose and be part of the on-the-ground work of this campaign. It's a way to get to know some of these last best places we are trying to protect," McDermott says.

Additionally, Colorado Congressman John Salazar has also announced a bill he is planning to introduce this fall that would protect 63,000 acres near the San Juan Mountains.