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Colorado wilderness campaign gaining ground

Conservation backers going on offensive

Will Shoemaker
Times Staff Writer

Pristine mountain-top vistas — areas renowned for their beauty, remoteness and unspoiled state — have long been protected in Colorado and throughout the nation with the wilderness designation. Efforts are currently afoot to extend the protection of public lands to mostly adjacent swaths of lower lying — yet forested, wildflower-filled, rocky and rugged — national forests and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) property.

The wilderness-designation drives include five parcels of public lands in Gunnison County, as well as large swaths in the White River National Forest and other proposals in Colorado expected to be introduced in Congress in coming



From left, Maureen Hall, Nathan Venn, Pat Del Tredici, Angie Kray and Tereza Venn check the map on a recent excursion to a proposed addition to the Powderhorn Wilderness Area. The Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign is proposing the addition and expects to have a bill carried in Congress this fall.

Courtesy photo

months.

The efforts are finding their fair share of support, despite concerns from some public lands users whose activities would be curtailed.

Locally, there have yet to be any such conflicts surface, though some mountain bike

proponents are keeping their eyes on the proposals in the event they expand to new lands in Gunnison County.

The efforts, conservationists say, are a result of the current political climate in Washington,

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D.C., paired with other factors — such as heightened awareness about protecting public lands while it's still an option and concerns about global climate change.

Campaign seeks out 'Hidden Gems'

Coordinated from the Wilderness Society's southwest regional office, the Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign began with focus on the White River National Forest. It's a partnership between the Wilderness Society, the Colorado Mountain Club, Colorado Environmental Coalition and Wilderness Workshop.

The proposal would create five new, stand-alone wilderness areas and expand others.

A few parcels in Gunnison County would add acreage to existing wilderness areas. The West Elk addition would add 6,878 acres to the existing 176,100 acre West Elk Wilderness Area. The Powderhorn Addition would add 3,388 acres to the existing 61,500 acre Powderhorn Wilderness Area.

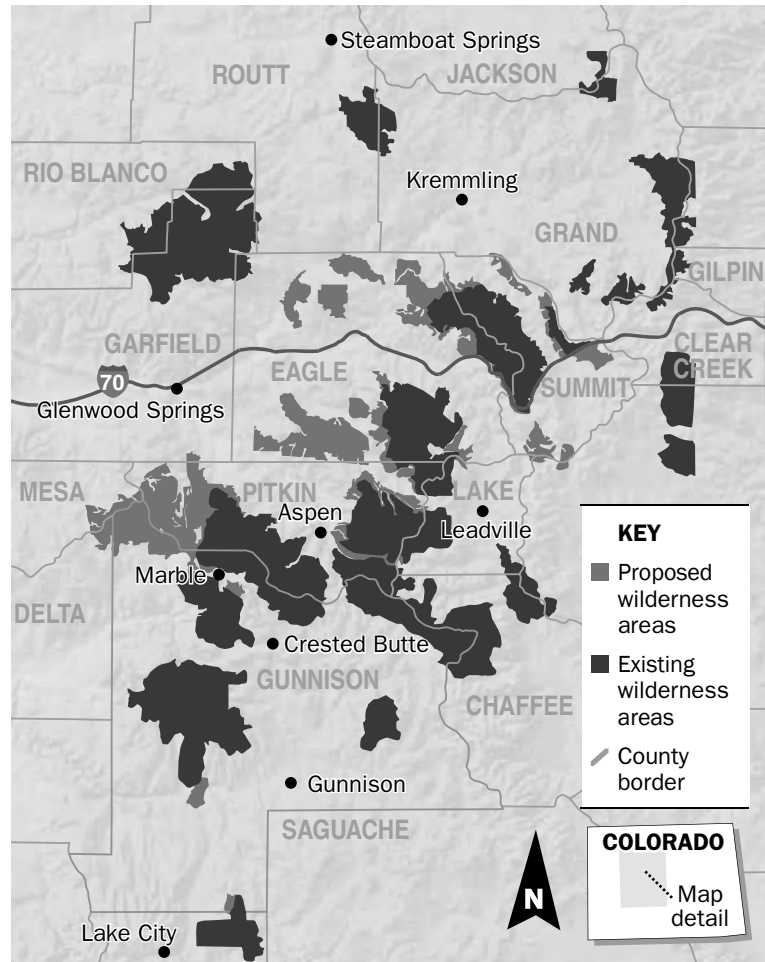
Former High Country Citizens' Alliance director Wendy McDermott was tapped as the local coordinator of the campaign.

Most of the wilderness in Colorado is at 10,000 feet and higher, said McDermott. "What's left unprotected in Colorado are these areas we're calling the 'hidden gems.' We believe these are some more diverse and middle-elevation lands," she added.

The local group has led two hikes in recent weeks, seeking to introduce locals to the areas being pursued for wilderness designation and gain public support.

One of those excursions trekked the Lion Gulch trail near the proposed West Elk addition on Sunday, Aug. 9.

Crested Butte resident and Elk Mountain Hikers Club co-chair Maureen Hall recalled the remote



Above is a draft map of areas currently eyed for wilderness protection by the Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign.

Map by Benjamin Dennee

ing with users in hot spot mountain biking areas that would be affected by the designation of proposed wilderness — including the Roaring Fork Valley, where Hidden Gems has been working with the Roaring Fork Mountain Bike Association (RFMBA).

Mike Pritchard, representing the group, said RFMBA has trouble supporting the entirety of the proposal because it would close miles of trails currently available to cyclists. However, there are a number of Hidden Gems' proposal areas that the group supports for wilderness designation; the remainder they would like to see protected via a "wilderness with bikes" designation.

Crested Butte Mountain Bike Association President John Chandler said he's unaware of any conflicts locally with the current proposals. He said he would be concerned if Hidden

aren't preconceived notions about what wilderness designation means. McDermott hopes to dispel any such myths.

"You can hunt, you can camp, you can ride your horses, you can rock climb, you can kayak, you can do basically anything that was already happening there," she said. "Grazing can still occur in wilderness."

Bicycles and any motorized use, however, are banned.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 states that it takes an act of Congress to designate wilderness areas. McDermott said that Hidden Gems hopes to introduce such legislation this fall.

Hidden Gems is a stand-alone campaign, but in the San Juan Mountains of southwest Colorado, Rep. John Salazar is seeking to protect 63,475 acres of public lands — through additions to wilderness areas and other protections. A bill

Wilderness Area.

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Crested Butte resident and Elk Mountain Hikers Club co-chair Maureen Hall recalled the remote nature of the area and flora and fauna she witnessed on the hike. That group supports the local wilderness area expansions that Hidden Gems is proposing.

"It's not an area that I think other user groups would say is being taken away," she offered of the West Elk addition.

Other parcels currently included in Hidden Gems' proposal in Gunnison County include the Gallo Hill addition to the Maroon Bells Wilderness Area, located northwest of the Town of Marble; the proposed McClure Pass addition to the Raggeds Wilderness Area; and two new, stand-alone wilderness areas — the proposed 3,866-acre Treasure Mountain Wilderness Area, three miles southeast of the Town of Marble, and the 59,406-acre Clear Fork area.

Exact boundaries up in air

Those closest to Hidden Gems campaign say that details still need to be worked out — like where to draw boundaries that would avoid potential conflicts. For some parcels, there may be conflict with timber sale, oil and gas development and other historic uses.

According to McDermott, the campaign is currently negotiat-

ing with users in hot spot mountain biking areas that would be affected by the designation of proposed wilderness — including the Roaring Fork Valley, where Hidden Gems has been working with the Roaring Fork Mountain Bike Association (RFMBA).

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Crested Butte Mountain Bike Association President John Chandler said he's unaware of any conflicts locally with the current proposals. He said he would be concerned if Hidden Gems' plans included, for example, the Whetstone Mountain Roadless Area, though he does support the group's other, current proposals for wilderness designation in Gunnison County.

McDermott indicated that she's working with grazers, outfitters and other users locally to avoid any conflicts, but declined to name them.

Why new wilderness?

Wilderness designation is the strongest, most permanent protection for untamed landscapes on public lands.

For that reason, some argue against the designation, while others believe that more parcels are worthy of its protection.

"It's really the best way to ensure that future generations have opportunities to experience these irreplaceable national treasures," McDermott argued. "Wilderness plays a vital role in our recreation-based economy, scenery, landscapes and quality of life in Colorado."

Additionally, wilderness areas maintain clean water, air and protect core wildlife habitat, migration corridors and provide humans with outlets for solitude and spiritual renewal, she said.

But that's not to say that there

aren't preconceived notions about what wilderness designation means. McDermott hopes to dispel any such myths.

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Hidden Gems is a stand-alone campaign, but in the San Juan Mountains of southwest Colorado, Rep. John Salazar is seeking to protect 63,475 acres of public lands — through additions to wilderness areas and other protections. A bill has yet to be proposed for that effort, but one is expected this fall.

Suzanne Jones, regional director for the Wilderness Society, noted other possible drives for additional wilderness in Colorado — including a possible 1.5 million-acre proposal for all BLM lands in Colorado that qualify for wilderness — that she expects to be proposed again in coming months.

Jones credits a Congress and federal administration that's more "environmentally inclined" as reason for the renewed drive for additional wilderness designation. She also said that the conservation community over the course of the last eight years has been more involved in defensive efforts to protect wild lands.

But, clearly, that's changing.

"I also think there's a growing awareness, especially as we see oil and gas drilling becoming more widespread across the Western Slope," Jones said. "People are realizing that we need to protect these public lands while we still can."

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