

LOCAL RANCHERS SUPPORT WILDERNESS IN PITKIN COUNTY

CARBONDALE — Two Carbondale area ranchers have come out in favor of wilderness designation for public lands on Assignment Ridge, northwest of Carbondale where they graze cattle.

Sue Rodgers, owner of the Crystal River Ranch, and Bill Fales and Marj Perry owners of the Cold Mountain Ranch, support wilderness protection for approximately 25,000 acres of public lands on Assignment Ridge that is part of the Hidden Gems Wilderness Proposal.

“Marj and I believe that it is vital to protect this land which will see more and more demands placed on it as Colorado’s and the nation’s population continues to grow,” Bill Fales wrote in a letter to Wilderness Workshop dated January 14.

“We look forward to working with Wilderness Workshop to accomplish this additional protection,” he continued.

Wilderness Workshop is one of four environmental organizations that is spearheading the effort to expand wilderness protections on public lands across four counties in Central Colorado with the Hidden Gems Wilderness Proposal. It has been leading the negotiations with stakeholders in Pitkin County, including ranchers like the Fales and Rodgers, in an effort to protect lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

Rodgers stated her support in a Jan. 18 letter to Wilderness Workshop: “As a conservationist and rancher, I support the wilderness designation for these two parcels, in order to preserve them in their natural and pristine condition and for wildlife habitat, with no oil and gas exploration or other exploitation of these lands. God only made so much land and it is up to us as humans as to how we use it.”

The two parcels she is referring to are grazing allotments on Bureau of Land Management lands held by Crystal River Ranch, one on Assignment Ridge and the other in a portion of Thompson Creek. She made it clear that her support relies on the lands being managed under Congressional Grazing Guidelines and Forest Service Manual rules on grazing management in wilderness.

“We are grateful for the support Sue, Bill and Marj are offering the Hidden Gems Wilderness Proposal,” said Sloan Shoemaker, executive director of Wilderness Workshop. “From day one, the 1964 Wilderness Act embraced grazing. Ranching and wilderness are compatible and complementary to one another. We are pleased to join with the Cold Mountain and Crystal River Ranches in seeking the most enduring protections for Assignment Ridge area, protections that both benefit this wild country and help sustain Carbondale’s ranching heritage.”

Wilderness designation, which requires an act of Congress, protects public lands from energy development, mining and logging, and prohibits the use of motorized vehicles and equipment. However, Congress has repeatedly made exceptions to motorized rules for maintenance of grazing allotments.

The Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness area are popular destinations for local hikers, hunters and horseback riders, and provide essential summer pasture for local ranches.

In his letter to the Wilderness Workshop, the Fales point out the unique opportunity presented with wilderness protection.

“If Assignment Ridge becomes wilderness it will create an unbroken section of protected land from the Crystal River west through our ranch through Assignment Ridge wilderness area and through Jerome Park which was protected by a conservation easement in 2007,” he says.

“This large piece of protected land will provide incredible wildlife habitat which is critical to many species especially during hard winters,” the letter continues.

The North Thompson Cattlemen’s Association, of which Fales is president, said it believes the biggest threat to the area is potential oil and gas development. The association has promised to work with local organizations to protect the area from such development.

“We will be collaborating with the N. Thompson Cattlemen’s Association on identifying other protective strategies aimed at keeping gas development out of Thompson Creek,” Shoemaker said.

The Hidden Gems Campaign intends to drop 32,166 acres from its wilderness proposal in the Thompson Creek area, including North Thompson, Middle Thompson, South Branch of Middle Thompson Creek and Coal Basin to accommodate ranchers who aren’t willing to support wilderness designation for the public lands in Thompson Creek where they graze cattle. That leaves 65,004 acres of proposed wilderness in the Pitkin County portion of the Hidden Gems Wilderness Proposal.

In a January 15 letter from the N. Thompson Cattlemen’s Association, Wilderness Workshop was credited for making adjustments to the Hidden Gems proposal in answer to the ranchers’ concerns.

“We appreciate Wilderness Workshop seeking out our opinion and adjusting the boundaries of your proposal based on our input,” the letter says.