



- Summit Daily/Bob Berwyn

Summit County mtn. bikers want time to mull over proposal

Hope to exclude some areas based on existing mountain bike use.

BY [BOB BERWYN](#)

SUMMIT DAILY NEWS

SUMMIT COUNTY, COLORADO,

SUMMIT COUNTY — While county commissioners are moving ahead with their endorsement of a plan to add new wilderness areas in Summit County, a local mountain biking group is trying to preserve access to some popular High Country trails.

After a few years of field work and behind-the-scenes discussions with other stakeholders, a coalition of wilderness advocates is making a big push to add new wilderness throughout the White River National Forest. In Summit County, the Hidden Gems plan would include more than 50,000 acres, including several big chunks near Breckenridge, at the south end of the county, where there is currently no designated wilderness.

The hope is to get a wilderness bill introduced in Congress this fall. The political climate is favorable for conservation interests, and the wilderness advocates feel like they missed a chance to include all the wilderness-worthy lands during the 2002 revision of the White River National Forest plan.

But the local mountain bikers said they want more time to work out site-specific details of the proposal with the wilderness group. They hope to exclude some areas from the proposal based on existing mountain bike use. Alternative management designations could protect the land and allow cycling use, they said.

"There's a lot of land with multiple-use designation in that area," said local wilderness backer Currie Craven, cofounder of Friends of the Eagles Nest Wilderness. "Wilderness areas at the southern end of the county could be important connections with roadless areas on the Pike-San Isabel National Forest."

Wilderness lands have values other than just recreation, Craven said, explaining how municipal and resort development and recreation have fragmented wildlife habitat at the south end of the Tenmile Range.

Maintaining some key blocks of wild lands could be key to preserving biological diversity in the area, Craven said.

The county commissioners decided two weeks ago during a work session to support the wilderness proposal, pending final discussions with local fire officials and possible minor boundary adjustments. But some local cyclists said they didn't hear about the meeting until it was too late.

Breckenridge residents Ellen Hollinshead and Dave Rossi have been the most outspoken leaders for the mountain bike community, generally represented by the Summit Fat Tire Society.

Hollinshead said the bike group believes in the concept of wilderness, but also wants to see some consideration of alternative designations.

In a draft comment letter on the wilderness proposal, the Fat Tire Society said it looks forward to "supporting forms of land protection that consistently treat bicycling as equal to and in the same category as hiking and equestrian use."

Specifically, the mountain bike group has suggested that some of the proposed areas could be managed under a designation other than wilderness, either as national conservation areas or national scenic areas.

Those alternative designations could allow mountain biking and give the Forest Service more flexibility to address forest health issues, according to the bike group's comment letter.

But wilderness backers said they believe all the areas they've picked deserve the highest level of protection under the 1964 Wilderness Act, which was amended in 1984 to exclude bicycles.

"That's a slippery slope," said Craven. "A lot of people believe if we go down that road, we'll have no more wilderness designations," he said.

Wilderness backers say the alternative designations can be undone administratively, but the bike group claims they can be nearly as effective for preserving land as a Congressional wilderness designation.

For more information on the Hidden Gems plan, go to www.whiteriverwild.org.