



## BOCC backs wilderness plan

Local mountain bikers say, 'not so fast!'

BY [BOB BERWYN](#)

SUMMIT DAILY NEWS,

SUMMIT COUNTY — A proposal to add significant new chunks of wilderness got a boost Tuesday, as the county commissioners decided to back the plan after a presentation by wilderness advocates.

"Personally, I'm very supportive ... I would like to see a resolution or a letter of support," said Commissioner Karn Stiegelmeier. The final proposal could be tweaked with a few minor boundary changes to address trail use issues and the need to protect homes from fires, she added.

Assistant county manager Steve Hill will draft a letter for the commissioners after checking with the local wildfire council to make sure the proposal doesn't conflict with efforts to reduce fire risk to homes and businesses.

Meanwhile, local mountain bikers are saying "not so fast."

"We were a few meetings away from coming to agreement," said Breckenridge resident Ellen Hollinshead, referring to ongoing talks between the wilderness advocates and local cyclists.

In general, the mountain bike community supports wilderness. Hollinshead said some of the areas identified in the Hidden Gems plan make sense, but others might be more suitable for a more inclusive designation that

would permit mountain biking.

The county's letter of support could be premature, said Dave Rossi, a Breckenridge resident and town council member.

In an e-mail to the commissioners, Rossi acknowledged the collaborative effort, but said there is still a need to educate locals about the potential impacts of wilderness designation on mountain biking.

Rossi said the commissioners should hold off on their letter until the Hidden Gems advocates have had a chance to respond to a Summit Fat Tire Society counter-proposal. The cyclists would like to ensure that existing mountain bike trails remain open for use.

"My hope is that there can be consensus and compromise soon," Stiegelmeier said. "There is a lot of momentum and a large number of proponents (for wilderness) in Summit County."

Stiegelmeier said she supports the full wilderness designation for the Hidden Gems areas because it wouldn't be subject to shifting political winds. Any other designation could be changed administratively and wouldn't be a secure designation, she added.

"The stars are aligned in the political landscape to get additional Wilderness protection now in the White River National Forest. We may not have this window of opportunity again," Stiegelmeier said.

### Background and timing

A coalition of homegrown and national groups has been working on the plan for a couple of years, meeting with various user groups to find a consensus. Now, the hope is to get a wilderness bill introduced in Congress in the fall session, said Lisa Smith of the Colorado Environmental Coalition.

Smith, who formerly worked as a U.S. Forest Service wilderness ranger in Summit County, said there's a "favorable, unique window of opportunity in Congress" to move forward on Colorado wilderness legislation.

U.S. Rep. Jared Polis, who represents the Summit County area in Congress, is excited about the proposal and plans to visit one of the areas under consideration today, Smith said.

The 1964 Wilderness Act already includes exemptions that enable the Forest Service to use mechanical means to address wildfire risks in wilderness areas. The Wilderness Act also specifically authorized the agency to fight fires with any means needed, including bulldozers, helicopters and chain saws, although the agency rarely uses those provisions, Smith said.

The issue is critical in Summit County because several local wilderness areas are directly adjacent to neighborhoods like Willowbrook and Ruby Ranch, according to Commissioner Thomas Davidson.

The latest version of the Hidden Gems proposal covers about 54,000 acres of national forest land in Summit County. It would expand the existing Eagles Nest Wilderness northward by adding Elliot Ridge, as well as adding big new High Country parcels around Porcupine Gulch (between Keystone and Loveland Pass), and at the south end of the Tenmile Range around Hoosier Pass.

#### More info

Total wilderness in U.S. — 109 million acres (most in Alaska)

White River National Forest — 750,000 acres out of 2.3 million acres

Hidden Gems proposal — 453,000 acres of new wilderness on WRNF

Hidden Gems proposal — 54,000 acres of new wilderness in Summit County  
WRNF plan recommends 2,900 acres of new wilderness in Summit County

### Collaboration?

Although the wilderness coalition has worked closely with local mountain bikers, not everyone is completely on board. Some cyclists still fear losing access to favored trails. Smith pledged to continue working with the Summit Fat Tire Society to find compromises when possible.

In some cases, trails have been “cherry stemmed” out of the wilderness areas, remaining as corridors open to cyclists. Similarly, the plan excludes roads like the one in Mayflower Gulch, designating wilderness on either side of the four-wheel drive path.

“If the Summit Fat Tire Society were at odds with this, they would have already come and talked to us,” said Davidson.

Some of the areas proposed for wilderness designation around Hoosier Pass have been used by snowmobilers in the winter — in some cases illegally, according to Smith, who said the areas are designated as non-motorized by the Forest Service.

Smith said there are compelling reasons to add wilderness, including economic benefits. Studies show that communities near wilderness experience longer visitor stays, and recreational activities associated with wilderness generate more than 107,000 jobs and \$10 million worth of economic activity in Colorado.

Critics of wilderness sometimes say the designation locks up the land, but Smith pointed out that the designation allows a wide range of uses — everything from hunting, fishing and kayaking through to cattle grazing, she said.

“Which, if any of these areas, are not accessible to (motorized) use,” said Commissioner Bob French. “We like to know who’ll be coming after us with torches and pitchforks,” he said.

Most of the areas proposed in Summit County are already managed as roadless, non-motorized areas. The wilderness designation would make that status permanent, providing the highest level of protection, according to Smith.

For more information on Hidden Gems go to

[www.whiteriverwild.org](http://www.whiteriverwild.org).

For more general wilderness information, go to

[www.wilderness.net](http://www.wilderness.net).