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-Baby Bear

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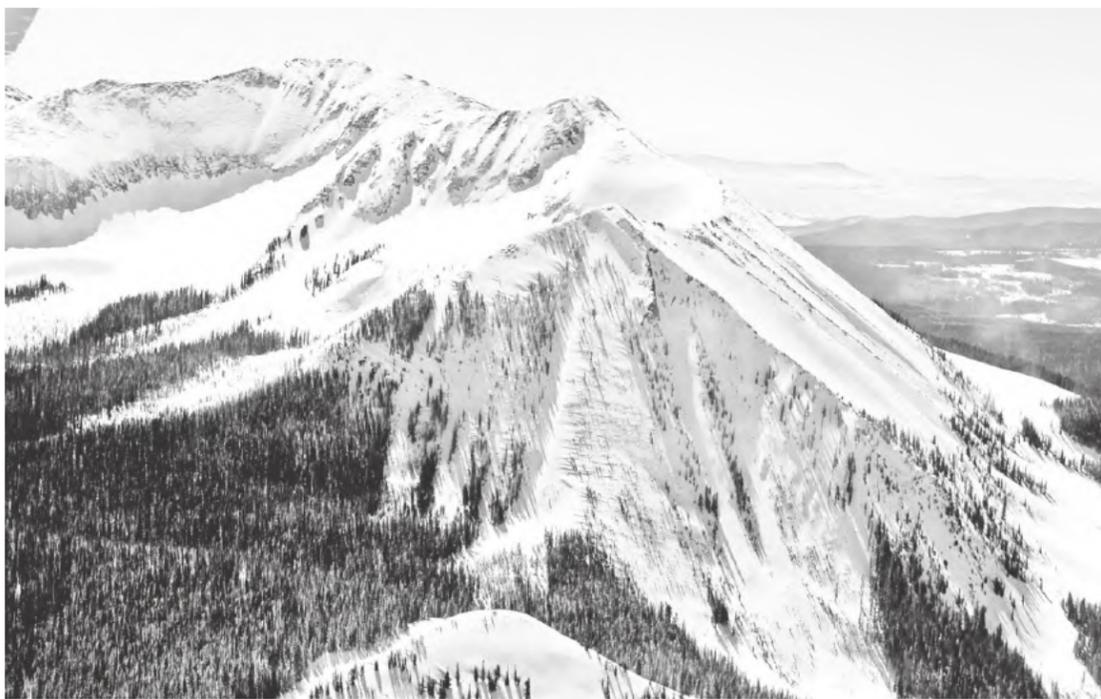
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Hidden Gems proponents hosted a flight over lands identified in the Gunnison Basin for possible wilderness designation last week. Seen here is Whetstone Mountain, which is included in the proposal.

Photo by Matt Smith

Half of Hidden Gems sent to Washington

Gunnison County lands still in the waiting, proponents say

Will Shoemaker
Times Staff Writer

After years of study and deliberations with stakeholders, a 244,000-acre portion of the Hidden Gems Wilderness proposal has been forwarded to Colorado's Congressional leaders for review.

At least for now, the remaining part of the proposal, including all lands in Gunnison County eyed for wilderness designation, has yet to be sent to Washington.

According to proponents, there's still work to do locally. But a similar wrap-up of public outreach and boundary adjustments, signifying a "complete" proposal for the remainder of land eyed by Hidden Gems proponents for wilderness designation, is expected to take place in coming months.

The remainder of Hidden Gems' proposal includes about 135,000 acres of land primarily in Pitkin and Gunnison counties.

A late addition to the proposal that includes an approximately 16,000-acre swath of land incorporating Whetstone Mountain, Mount Axtell and Carbon Peak has proven among the most controversial aspects of the plan locally — especially among mountain bikers and motorized users of those lands, where trails currently exist.

Yet, in a heavily attended meeting in front of the Gunnison County Commissioners early this year, local support for the Whetstone parcel's designation as wilderness was quite evident among multiple interest groups.

The campaign is seeking designation of new wilderness areas or additions to current areas on the White River and Gunnison National Forests and adjacent Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in Colorado.

All of the lands in the complet-

ed portion of the Hidden Gems proposal are located in either the White River National Forest or in nearby lands managed by the BLM. They're also all in Summit or Eagle counties and within Colorado's Second Congressional District (CD-2).

CD-2 Rep. Jared Polis (D-Boulder), who was previously named as a possible sponsor of legislation, has reportedly begun hosting public meetings to further vet the proposal.

Tuesday, Hidden Gems announced the results of a poll conducted by RBI Strategies & Research of Denver. The telephone poll results, released during the news teleconference, indicated strong support for both additional protection of public lands and the Hidden Gems proposal specifically.

The poll was conducted in CD-2 among voters likely to participate in this fall's election and found that about two-thirds of those sampled (650 total) support Hidden Gems.

Hidden Gems campaign Director Pete Kolbenschlager said that a similar poll is not currently planned for the remaining part of the proposal, which is in Colorado's Third Congressional District, a traditionally more conservative district.

"We've said all along the work is really what drives that decision," he explained of when the remainder of the proposal might also be submitted to Congressional leaders. "We're in the process of wrapping up some of our final conversations and refinements in the proposal in Pitkin and Gunnison County. We hope to have a similar proposal there sometime later this spring."

Laura Yale, Hidden Gems coordinator for Gunnison County, said that the group is continuing to work with ranchers, mountain bikers and snowmobilers to finalize boundaries in the remainder of the proposal, including Gunnison County.

Yale indicated that the campaign has removed about 1,160 acres for mountain bike trails from the Whetstone portion of the proposal, and a few hundred acres to make boundaries more identifiable for snowmobilers.

Hidden Gems survey results

Designating more public lands as wilderness?

Strong favor	50%
Somewhat favor	20%
Lean favor	2%
Somewhat oppose	11%
Strong oppose	9%
Undecided	4%
Refused	1%

Support for Hidden Gems?

Strong favor	41%
Somewhat favor	21%
Lean favor	3%
Somewhat oppose	12%
Strong oppose	11%
Undecided	8%
Refused	3%

Above is a sample of recent survey results from a poll conducted by RBI Strategies & Research of Denver among 500 voters (an additional 150 were polled as well) in Colorado's Second Congressional District.

"But Whetstone almost in its entirety is still in the proposal," she said.

Since sending about half of the total proposal to Congressional leaders, Hidden Gems opponents have already begun criticizing the effort.

"Rather than continue to work with the different stakeholders and groups to gain more public input and come up with a proposal everyone could get behind, Hidden Gems campaign has choose to move on with their proposal 'as is,'" the opposition White River Forest Alliance stated in a press release this week.

Yale said that the decision to submit the Eagle and Summit county portion of the overall proposal to Congressional leaders prior to the rest was simply a matter of circumstance.

"It just so happened that the timing for the counties was different and this is how it worked out," she said.

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