

Why lock up so much acreage in Doña Ana County?

Many parcels fail to meet the original wilderness criteria

By **JERRY SCHICKENDANZ**
For the Las Cruces Bulletin

President Obama recently announced Wilderness Month in celebration of the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

Perhaps not surprisingly, last week, the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Bill was introduced into the U.S. Senate with much fanfare. A full page ad appeared in the Sunday, Sept. 20, edition of The Las Cruces Sun-News, thanking Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall.

News releases and interviews sprung up, the many organizations gushing with praise for the introduction of the bill.

Steve Capra, executive director of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance (NMWA) announced they were on the way toward their goal of protecting 10 percent of New Mexico's lands. This would amount to 7.7 million acres of wilderness designation.

The original Wilderness Act was about protecting America's wild lands that were a minimum of 5,000 acres. They were to be free of sight and sound of man, where there was solitude and one could enjoy lands untrammelled by actions of man with the prohibition of mechanized vehicles. This was a noble undertaking to protect lands from further developmental loss of these characteristics. The Gila Wilderness was set aside in the 1920s and became America's first official wilderness.

I have personally enjoyed spending many days and nights in the Gila Wilderness, floating twice down the Gila

River for 50 miles, riding horse back in all directions and hunting and fishing the immense protected lands. I value my experiences of solitude, free from sight and sound of mankind and just experiencing being alone. The lands set aside for protection during the initial years by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land

Management measured up to the vision of the authors of the Wilderness Act.

However, today I'm not sure lands we are setting aside for wilderness have those same values. So, why are we protecting land under the guise of wilderness? What is the real purpose here?

Why are we thrusting lands into protection of the Wilderness Act that don't measure up to the original criteria? If we want to protect lands from housing and commercial development, there are other ways. Are we trying to stop someone from making economic gain on federal lands? Are we trying to protect lands for natural beauty? Are we trying to make economic gain from lands adjacent to wilderness? Are we trying to protect the lands from being sold, or are we being hoodwinked by some other agenda that has greater implications? I could go on and on about reasons for protecting land, but dealing with a broader political agenda is very hard for me to accept.

I'm not sure that we are truly aware of why we must lockup 259,000 acres in Doña Ana County. In 2007, the stakeholder group process was organized by the city to study potential wilderness designations. It was concluded that only 54,184 acres should be considered for

wilderness. The process concluded that there was objection to the same designation for an additional 302,970 acres. The BLM in their study of lands that had wilderness potential recommended that 194,000 acres of county land met the wilderness criteria and that 261,000 acres did not, but the bill just introduced to Congress recommends 259,000 acres for wilderness and 100,000 acres for other levels of protection.

People for Preserving our Western Heritage (PFPOWH) support a plan that is generally in agreement with the stakeholder process.

Every one of us needs to question why so much land that doesn't qualify under the original intent of the Wilderness Act would be placed under wilderness protection. Other forms of land protection can and will fully protect the lands from development and sale. One must become better informed on the issues of wilderness before one blindly goes along with locking up an immense portion of Doña Ana County.


Wilderness can and will limit your current privileges in using those lands, and, at the same time, limit the ability of making improvements to water and rangeland conditions that can benefit wildlife.

This is not the panacea that many of you who support this cause have been led to believe. This is not a feel-good measure that can be changed, and, if it is allowed to grow at the dimensions that NMWA envisions, most of the western half of New Mexico where federal lands dominate will be off limits to the average American. The end result is that it will be the domain of the affluent, progressive voter who has the time, the means and the energy to pack into or have some outfitter haul their gear from spot to spot to sit and contemplate the wonder of it all.

The Organ Mountains are one thing, but the other areas are something very much different.

Jerry Schickendanz, is a dean emeritus at New Mexico State University and chairman of the People For Preserving Our Western Heritage.

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