

MANAGEMENT OF THE COLUMBINE HONDO WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

THE COLUMBINE HONDO WILDERNESS STUDY AREA was designated by an act of Congress in 1980, as part of the New Mexico Wilderness Act of 1980¹. The designation language “specifies that such wilderness study areas shall, until Congress determines otherwise, be administered by the Secretary so as to maintain their presently existing wilderness character and potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System, subject to valid existing rights. Permits current levels of motorized and other uses and improvements to continue in such areas subject to reasonable regulation.”

In addition to the management direction laid out in the designation language, the U.S. Forest Service provides management direction for its Wilderness Study Areas in its Forest Service Manual, which states, “Any inventoried roadless area recommended for wilderness or designated wilderness study is not available for any use or activity that may reduce the wilderness potential of the area. Activities currently permitted may continue pending designation, if the activities do not compromise the wilderness values of the area.”²

And lastly, various Forest Service regions provide their own interpretation of the management guidance from the Forest Service manual by issuing regional guidance on wilderness and roads. The Forest Service Region 3, where the Columbine-Hondo Study Area is located, issued guidance on travel management planning which prevents designating routes for motor vehicle use in primitive areas, but does not address recommended wilderness or wilderness study areas. This lack of regional guidance on the management of wilderness study areas leaves the door open for subjective decisions as to whether a variety of uses, such as all-terrain vehicles or mountain bikes, should be allowed.

Overall, it is important to note that the lack of specific national or regional guidance on the matter results in inconsistency in agency decision making, and has facilitated authorization of uses in recommended wilderness areas or wilderness study areas nationwide that can reduce an area’s wilderness potential and compromise an area’s wilderness values.³

If the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area were to be Congressionally designated as Wilderness, it would be protected from future development such as roads, dams, or other permanent structures; from most timber cutting and the operation of motorized and/or mechanized vehicles including all terrain vehicles and mountain bikes; and from new mining claims and mineral leasing.

And while the Columbine-Hondo area would be permanently protected from uses that degrade its character, many recreational activities would still be allowed, such as hunting, fishing, horseback riding, hiking, camping, canoeing and other non-mechanized outdoor recreation. Mining and livestock grazing are permitted to continue in wilderness areas if these practices existed prior to an area’s designation. Additionally, Section 4(d)(1) of the Wilderness Act permits any measures necessary to control fire, insect outbreaks, and disease in wilderness areas.⁴

In summary, in order to protect the wilderness character of the Columbine-Hondo area from degradation due to motorized and mechanized uses, while still allowing many important recreational activities, permanent Wilderness designation is necessary.

¹ Public Law 96-550

² FSM 1923.03

³ TWS Letter to USDA Forest Service Chief, November 19, 2009

⁴ H. Rep. 95-540, accompanying the Endangered American Wilderness Act, PL 95-237. (emphasis added).