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editorial

Pass bills to protect state's wilderness

A pair of congressional measures would provide crucial Wilderness Act designations for Browns Canyon and Rocky Mountain National Park.

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Two of Colorado's most spectacular scenic areas are poised to win permanent legal protection - if partisan politics doesn't undercut the coalition of business leaders, environmental groups and local governments fighting for Wilderness Act designation for Browns Canyon and Rocky Mountain National Park. We urge Colorado's legislative delegation to close ranks behind both of these vital measures.

A House committee Thursday heard a bill by Colorado Republicans Rep. Joel Hefley and Sen. Wayne Allard to safeguard 20,000 pristine acres in Browns Canyon. The area lies east of the Arkansas River in Chaffee County and would complement white-water recreation on that waterway. It's important to pass the bill this year because Hefley is retiring after 20 years and it might be years before his successor develops the clout to renew the wilderness push.

The Rocky Mountain National Park wilderness bill by Colorado Democrats Rep. Mark Udall and Sen. Ken Salazar would protect almost a quarter of a million acres of backcountry - about 94 percent of what is one of the crown jewels of America's park system. Nearly 16,000 acres, still a vast area, would be excluded from wilderness uses, providing ample space for visitor facilities and leaving access roads, including Trail Ridge Road and Fall River Road, open for traffic.

A permanent wilderness designation will solidify management practices that have been in place since the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964. Yet, last week, Allard and Republican Rep. Marilyn Musgrave urged delaying action on the bill - citing concerns that wilderness designation might inhibit efforts to control insect infestations and forest fires and urging a study of the economic impact of such a designation.

There is no merit in those objections. The bill contains specific language ensuring that the wilderness area can be protected against fires and insects. As to economic impact, wilderness designation is avidly supported by local chambers of commerce and local governments in the area - the very people whose livelihoods depend on luring outdoor recreationalists to the area.

Allard and Musgrave should drop their objections and put their shoulders to passing the wilderness designation. While it has Democratic sponsorship, it would be a shame if partisanship derailed efforts to protect one of Colorado's most precious natural assets.