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Bipartisanship may advance RMNP bill

After long wait, Colorado delegation gets on board with compromise

In a long overdue effort, the Colorado congressional delegation has finally united in support of designating Rocky Mountain National Park as wilderness.

Sens. Wayne Allard and Ken Salazar, and U.S. Reps. Marilyn Musgrave and Mark Udall are scheduled to make the announcement May 14 that they have reached a compromise on the Rocky Mountain National Park Wilderness Bill.

As welcome as the announcement is, the story behind decades of delays is disappointing.

The park has been managed as a wilderness area for more than 30 years, and the concept of making it an official wilderness area was proposed in 1974 by President Nixon to protect the park from overuse and development. The proposal was largely ignored by Congress in the 1980s and 1990s because towns and counties near RMNP didn't support the legislation.

But the delay in recent years has primarily been fueled by political partisanship - within Colorado's own delegation.

We are hopeful that this compromise is a sign that bipartisanship will be the norm for the future.

In October, Musgrave and Allard, both Republicans, offered their own version of a bill to gain wilderness designation for RMNP.

Their proposal came seven months after one offered by Sen. Ken Salazar and Rep. Mark Udall, both Democrats. At the time, Musgrave was smack in the middle of a contentious re-election campaign for the 4th Congressional District.

While the proposals differed, particularly on access to the Grand Ditch, which is an important water source, none of the differences seemed to warrant sponsoring two separate bills. In fact, a split state delegation in Congress is ineffective.

If lawmakers from Colorado couldn't reach common ground, why should lawmakers with less of a vested interest in RMNP care to pursue legislation to protect it?

Particularly disconcerting is that by 2005, wilderness designation was supported and promoted by the towns of Estes Park, Winter Park and Grand Lake as well as Larimer, Grand and Boulder counties.

Yet, the effort languished as elected officials appeared to battle not as much over the content of the bill, but more so, over who would take credit for the legislation.

Wilderness designation will do little to change current park management and function. Current activities, such as hiking, climbing, skiing, fishing etc. will continue, and Trail Ridge Road and Fall River Road will be maintained for motorized travel, according to www.southernrockies.org/rocky.

But the legislation, if finally passed, will ensure that the park remains as it is today for future generations to enjoy.

The compromise bill deserves to be commended, and it should serve as a positive example of the effective nature of bipartisanship.
