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Legislators reach accord on park's designation

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After three decades and much infighting among Colorado's congressional delegation, Rocky Mountain National Park now seems poised to gain an official designation as a wilderness area.

Compromise on the Rocky Mountain National Park Wilderness Bill was announced Monday by Colorado's two U.S. senators, Democrat Ken Salazar and Republican Wayne Allard, and two of the state's U.S. representatives, Republican Marilyn Musgrave and Democrat Mark Udall.

None of the elected officials' offices would release additional information on the bill's language, deferring comment until Monday's formal announcement in the park.

The designation would guarantee preservation of scenic and historic wilderness, unique wildlife as well as the scientific, educational and recreational resources the park offers.

Rocky Mountain National Park has been operating as a wilderness area since 1974, when the National Park Service first recommended the park's 249,339 acres gain the designation, which carries with it increased protection and restrictions on the land's use.

Park officials have long awaited the federal classification, what they call the "Big W," for years.

"We're all very excited," said Kyle Patterson, spokeswoman for the national park. "If people like the way the park has been managed and maintained the last decades, then they should be happy because getting the Big W will help us ensure the (same) management in the future."

Because the park has been operated as a wilderness area for decades, the compromise bill will carry no additional costs or requirements with it, Patterson said, adding that it will just ensure that today's management practices are consistent in the future.

"It will remove ambiguity for park managers who have been operating under (regulations) set forth through policy," Patterson said. "If we get the Big W, we will be able to operate under (written) law, which inherently has less interpretation involved."

Patterson said she hasn't seen the bill yet and wasn't able to make comments about its language or terms.

The compromise comes in the wake of bitter disagreement last year that pitted Musgrave and Allard against Salazar and Udall. The dispute centered on whether to reference the Wilderness Act in the legislation, as well as liability protections for owners of an irrigation ditch.

Udall and Salazar said inclusion of Wilderness Act language in the bill was vital to ensure full protection to the park; Allard and Musgrave said they didn't want to automatically subject the park to future amendments to the Wilderness Act.

Udall and Salazar introduced a bill early in 2006 and were surprised when Musgrave and Allard offered an alternative several months later. The Republicans and Democrats traded pointed barbs over the competing bills.

At the time, Musgrave and Allard said the Udall-Salazar bill didn't do enough to protect liability of the Grand Ditch owners, an irrigation pipeline that carries water to 50,000 acres of farmland in Northern Colorado.

The Grand Ditch, owned by Fort Collins-based Water Supply and Storage Co., was built before the national park was created.

Musgrave and Allard's bill carried protection for Grand Ditch owners as well as provisions that cleared the way for prospecting and other mineral research.

Grand Ditch owners are currently in court with the park regarding damage that occurred when the canal wall breached three years ago and flooded areas of the park.

If a judge decides the Grand Ditch owners are responsible for the clean-up costs, it could force a sale of the company and cause some farmers who rely on the late summer water to close shop, ditch officials said.

"It's a major portion of my water delivery for my farm out here," said Fred Walker, a Water Supply and Storage Co. shareholder. "I think it represents somewhere between 25 and 33 percent of my total water supply and is a vital part of my farming operation."

Walker, who farms beets, barley and corn, said because the water coming from the Grand Ditch is at such high elevations, it typically serves as late-season irrigation needed to finish growing his crops.

"It's like having a reservoir but not actually having one," Walker said.

Numerous phone calls to the Water Supply and Storage Co. were not returned Monday afternoon.
