



Lawmakers reach deal on Rocky wilderness designation

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Under a deal announced Monday, parts of Rocky Mountain National Park will become wilderness areas and the area's agriculturally precious water from the Grand Ditch will be protected.

The new measure appears to end an acrimonious debate between U.S. Sens. Ken Salazar, a Democrat, and Wayne Allard, a Republican, who introduced competing wilderness-designation measures last year.

"This all just came together in the last week, and we're still dotting I's and crossing T's," said Sean Conway, chief of staff for Allard.

Allard, Salazar and U.S. Reps. Marilyn Musgrave, a Republican, and Mark Udall, a Democrat, will meet Monday in the park to announce their new measure, which caps 30 years of efforts to protect the park while also protecting agricultural interests. Udall has introduced similar legislation every year for the past eight years.

It is not clear yet how the measure is different from previous attempts, but Conway said people concerned about the Grand Ditch will be satisfied.

Udall and Salazar had introduced a measure in July to designate certain areas of the park as wilderness. Musgrave and Allard opposed it, saying the bill did not do enough to address economic issues stemming from such a designation, including the impact on tourism and the Grand Ditch.

The ditch, which pre-dates the park, carries more than 20,000 acre-feet of water through the park to communities on the eastern plains. The Salazar bill also exempted the Grand Ditch and its right-of-way from certain restrictions, but the Republican members were concerned it did not sufficiently protect the ditch.

The Democratic measure also protected the park under the federal Wilderness Act.

In September, Musgrave and Allard introduced their own wilderness bill, which removed the park's designation under the Wilderness Act.

Conway said the lawmakers and their staff agreed not to talk about the bill's substance. It is not clear whether the park would be protected under the Wilderness Act.

But he said the new version takes care of the ditch concerns.

"The ditch company and all the entities that this water is of interest to have been carefully consulted, and their concerns, from where we stand right now, have been addressed," Conway said.

Fred Walker, a Windsor-area farmer and past president of the Water Supply and Storage Company, which owns the ditch, said the ditch was vital to his farm and other regional agricultural interests.

"It depends on the year, but it delivers from a quarter to one-third of my total water supply for my farm," he said.

What's more, the ditch is fed by high mountain snows that take a long time to melt. The late-summer runoff means the ditch is

like being able to store water without needing a reservoir, Walker said. That's crucial for Walker's farm, where he grows Coors barley, sugar beets and corn.

"It's critical from two standpoints -- one is the volume and the other is the timing as well," he said.

Greeley City Manager Roy Otto said he looks forward to seeing the new bill, and that any measure that protects the ditch is good news.

About a year ago, the city bought a small interest in the ditch company, but city leaders' main concern was the health of the region's agricultural economy, Otto said.

He said he was surprised last year that there was such debate about the ditch and how it affected protecting the park.

"It seems to me that we should be able to come to a solution for the environmental concerns in Rocky Mountain National Park and the real needs for producing food on the eastern plains," he said.

What's Next

Residents are invited to Rocky Mountain National Park next week to learn about new federal legislation to designate portions of the park as wilderness.

WHO: U.S. Sens. Ken Salazar and Wayne Allard, U.S. Reps. Mark Udall and Marilyn Musgrave, Rocky Mountain National Park Superintendent Vaughn Baker and local leaders

WHEN: 11 a.m. Monday

WHERE: Moraine Park Campground Amphitheater at Rocky Mountain National Park

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