

## Rocky Mountain News

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### Congress should act on wilderness bills

July 24, 2006

Two areas in Colorado proposed for official designation as "wilderness" richly deserve that status.

Browns Canyon lies on the east side of the Arkansas River in Chaffee County. A U.S. House bill, H.R. 4235, introduced by Rep. Joel Hefley and a companion bill in the Senate, S. 1971 introduced by Sen. Wayne Allard, would set aside 20,000 acres as wilderness.

The other area includes 94 percent of Rocky Mountain National Park. It is the subject of companion bills introduced by Rep. Mark Udall (H.R. 4935) and Sen. Ken Salazar (S. 1510) and would cover 249,339 acres.

Did you assume Rocky Mountain National Park was already wilderness? In practice, it has been managed that way since the 1960s - the Wilderness Act became law in 1964 - and President Nixon proposed a slightly smaller area of the park for designation in 1974. The current recreational uses of the park are consistent with wilderness use, and would not be altered. Also, Trail Ridge Road and Fall River Road would remain accessible to traffic.

Over the years, we've supported some wilderness designations and opposed others, such as President Clinton's 1996 proclamation of 1.8 million acres in Utah for the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument under the pretext that it was covered by the 1906 Antiquities Act. But the responsibility to designate wilderness properly belongs to Congress, and that process is being honored.

When the federal government decides it wants to do something, the wishes of local communities often count for little. But in these two cases, local wishes and national interests are aligned. Estes Park and Grand Lake, where most Rocky Mountain National Park visitors enter and leave, flourish because of tourism, and protecting the vistas and values important to tourists is good for their economies.

The part of the Arkansas River adjacent to the Browns Canyon area is one of the most popular whitewater destinations in the country, and the wilderness area would preserve unspoiled views for those running the river - when they have time to look. The surrounding areas already offer many kinds of recreation, and adding the possibility of a wilderness experience can only enhance the area's appeal.

With broad support and virtually no opposition, with the session approaching its end, why can't Congress get this job done?

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