

Rocky Mountain News

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Backing grows to shield park

Rocky Mountain nearer to status as wilderness area

By **Todd Hartman, Rocky Mountain News**
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A long-running effort to designate Rocky Mountain National Park as a wilderness area leaped forward Monday when Colorado's congressional delegation reported it had reached a compromise on the matter.

A statement issued jointly by four members of the delegation - two Republicans and two Democrats - promised all the details at a news conference next Monday at a park campground.

Sen. Ken Salazar and Rep. Mark Udall, both Democrats, and Sen. Wayne Allard and Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, both Republicans, plan to participate.

The quest to make the park a wilderness area dates back three decades, to the Nixon administration. Rep. Mark Udall has carried a bill on the issue every year since 1999. But a variety of hang-ups have prevented the measure from taking effect.

As a national park, Rocky Mountain already has significant protections. Designating it as wilderness would have the primary effect of enshrining its protected status into law, not just Park Service policy, said park spokeswoman Kyle Patterson.

For example, it would keep future administrations from further developing the park, should someone "get the great idea to build a hotel inside the backcountry or another highway across the park," said Suzanne Jones, regional director of the Wilderness Society.

"It basically locks in the current protections that are there," said Lawrence Pacheco, spokesman for Udall.

One significant matter that would have to be part of a compromise involves the privately owned Grand River Ditch that flows through the park, Jones said. Issues of maintenance access to the ditch and resolving liability for its problems - such as the blowout in 2003 that sent a large flow of sediment pouring into the park - have been the subject of dispute among lawmakers.

Last year, federal authorities sued the Water Supply and Storage Co. for the damage caused by the blowout, which allegedly washed out part of a mountainside.

Other disputes over the years include concern that the park would claim additional water rights with the wilderness designation - an unfounded worry, Patterson said. She said the park has obtained its rights through the state water court system and wouldn't be seeking more.

Allaying concerns of "gateway" communities surrounding the park, including Estes Park, also have slowed the bill. The communities initially worried that a wilderness designation could hurt their economies by limiting activities in the park.

But backers of the wilderness designation say the public will be able to do all of the activities currently permitted in the park.

Last year, it was election-year politics that appeared to hamstring the measure. Republicans and Democrats were at odds after Musgrave and Allard introduced their own version of the measure.

The basics of Udall's 2006 version of the bill called for designating nearly 250,000 acres, about 95 percent, of the park as wilderness. It set aside certain areas, including Trail Ridge Road, other roads, water storage and conveyance structures and buildings, so improvements could be made in the future.

"All I can tell you is this is a really significant accomplishment to have the whole delegation united on this effort," said Allard spokesman Steve Wymer. "This has been a long time coming."



Matt McClain © The Rocky

Matthew and Texie Lane, of Aurora, hike along Lawn Lake Trail in Rocky Mountain National Park on Monday.

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