



## 11. WILDERNESS: 'Hidden Gems' proposal could hamper military training, officials say (10/22/2009)

**Eryn Gable, special to E&E**

A proposal to designate hundreds of thousands of additional acres of public lands on Colorado's Western Slope as wilderness has garnered opposition from some unusual quarters: the Pentagon.

The reason? Military officials are concerned that the proposal could place helicopter training areas used to prepare pilots for conditions like Afghanistan off-limits.

At the center of the controversy is the High-Altitude Army Aviation Training Site in the small mountain town of Gypsum, Colo., not far from the ski mecca of Vail. The facility is the only Defense Department aviation school that trains pilots to experience the combination of high-altitude flying and rough terrain.

About 400 pilots a year train at the site, including Army aviators, NATO helicopter pilots and pilots from other branches of the U.S. military.

Maj. Josh Day, the site's commander, said some of the lands included in the "Hidden Gems" wilderness proposal include areas currently used for training. Provisions of the Wilderness Act prohibit the use of mechanized machinery in wilderness areas, so landing helicopters would no longer be permitted, he said. Additionally, Army regulations require that pilots stay at least 2,000 feet above designated wilderness areas.

Army officials have met with backers of the wilderness proposal, but Day said it was "too early to tell" whether those talks would produce a compromise. "Further discussions are scheduled, so we'll see where it goes," he said.

Sloan Shoemaker, executive director of the Wilderness Workshop, one of the groups backing the wilderness proposal, was more confident that an agreement could be reached that ensures a continuation of military training while protecting ecologically important areas.



A proposal to designate 450,000 acres of public lands on Colorado's Western Slope as wilderness has raised concerns among several interest groups, including the Army which uses the mid-elevation peaks for helicopter training. Photo courtesy of Aron Ralston/Wilderness Workshop.

"We can through the use of various legislative language and other approaches ensure the continued operation of HAATS, as well as achieve a significant level of landscape conservation," Shoemaker said.

The Hidden Gems wilderness proposal straddles a portion of the Upper Colorado River watershed and would protect a critical stretch of wildlife migration corridor as well as habitat for several key species, including recently reintroduced lynx. Proponents say the Hidden Gems lands are unique, too, in that they are mid-elevation areas, whereas most of the existing designated wilderness areas in Colorado are high-elevation "rock and ice" landscapes.

The 450,000-acre Hidden Gems proposal includes more than 40 land units, many of which adjoin existing wilderness areas, and is based on a decade-long inventory of potential wilderness in the White River National Forest. Of the White River's 2.3 million acres, about 750,000 are already wilderness.

The coalition of groups that inventoried Hidden Gems had identified an additional 1.1 million acres of wilderness-quality lands in the White River forest that are not part of the current proposal, and it added several Bureau of Land Management parcels in the Gunnison National Forest to the mix.

"We want to use the highest level of protections the nation offers to ensure that these lower-elevation ecosystems, these big, wild, roadless places, remain as wonderful as they are now," Shoemaker said.

## Access concerns

Proponents expect to have a legislative proposal for Colorado lawmakers by the end of the year. In the meantime, environmental groups hope to craft a plan that reduces conflict with other interest groups as much as possible. But achieving consensus won't be easy. Several groups in the area have already expressed concerns with the proposal, namely that they will be shut out of areas they currently use to recreate.

Among those opposing the plan is the Roaring Fork Mountain Bike Association. Mountain bikes are banned in wilderness, and the group contends the Hidden Gems proposal would have too great an impact on current and future mountain biking in the Roaring Fork Valley. Wilderness areas already account for one-third of the White River National Forest, and the Hidden Gems proposal would increase the total areas that exclude mountain bikes to 45 percent, according to the association.

Instead, the group supports designating about 110,000 acres as wilderness, with the remainder of the Hidden Gems lands receiving an alternate designation -- such as a national conservation or recreation area -- that would maintain existing bicycle access.

For its part, the Hidden Gems Campaign says the proposal has been crafted around established trails, and it expects all such conflicts to be settled before the proposal goes to Congress.

The campaign has also resisted efforts to achieve protections through alternative designations, noting that such designations do not enjoy enabling legislation that explicitly defines their meaning. Thus, while the Wilderness Act of 1964 spells out what activities are and are not allowed in wilderness areas, there is no statute that defines explicitly what a national conservation or national recreation area is.

As a result, alternative designations require an extra public scoping process to define what uses will be allowed in a protected area. Proponents of the Hidden Gems wilderness campaign fear that pursuing such a designation could open the door to nonconforming activities such as motorized recreation, energy development and logging that would render the designation almost meaningless.

In addition to the mountain bikers, other recreational groups have lined up to oppose the designation, fearing they will be shut out of the newly designated wilderness areas.

Sean Martin, president of the Mount Sopris Recreational Riders group, noted that even excluding designated snowmobile routes from the wilderness designation would be insufficient. "The problem is that the snowmobiles are not limited to routes and trails," Martin said. "They're just the means by which we get started." His group maintains that to win snowmobilers' support, the proposal would have to leave much more forest area open to the vehicles.

Jack Albright, vice president of the White River Forest Alliance, said his group is concerned about the effects of the wilderness proposal on all recreational users, including snowmobilers, four-wheelers, climbers and even hikers. Albright noted that language in the Wilderness Act prohibiting mechanized equipment makes it much more difficult for the Forest Service to maintain trails in wilderness areas, which could make even hiking opportunities more limited in these areas.

"We don't want to see the loss of the multiple-use concept in the forest's management," Albright said.

Albright noted that many area residents would like to see the lands included in the wilderness proposal protected from commercial and industrial development, but they don't want to lose access to those lands for recreation.

"Most people do want and appreciate wilderness, but at the sacrifice of a multiple-use designation, I don't think people are so excited about it," he said.

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