

Colorado Wilderness Network

**Conservationists Applaud Reintroduction of
Rocky Mountain National Park Wilderness Bill**

Citizens and local groups work together to protect one of Colorado's crown jewels

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DENVER – Conservationists applaud Senator Ken Salazar's and Congressman Mark Udall's reintroduction of legislation that seeks to forever protect the vast backcountry of Rocky Mountain National Park. By designating 94 percent of the Park as wilderness in the National Wilderness Preservation System, the legislation would ensure that the Park's awe-inspiring vistas, popular hiking trails and incredible wildlife habitat would be preserved as a draw for visitors to the region and for the enjoyment and appreciation of generations to come.

"It's about time to get this settled," says Estes Park Mayor John Baudek, who has recently seen solid support from Estes Park citizens for protecting the town's greatest economic and natural resource. "Being a gateway community to Rocky Mountain National Park, it's in our best interest for Rocky Mountain National Park to remain a pristine place for generations to come. Let's get this act passed."

Visitors from all over the country – up to 3.2 million a year – come to explore Rocky Mountain National Park, climb Longs Peak (an accessible 14,000-foot peak), and drive along Trail Ridge Road through alpine tundra to the Continental Divide at 12,183 feet. The thick forests that cover the western half of the Park provide a great opportunity for moose and elk sightings, while the eastern peaks are a splendid introduction to the magnificence of the Rocky Mountain Range.

“We are glad to be working with local citizens and our congressional delegation to protect one of Colorado’s most breathtaking landscapes,” says Suzanne Jones, Regional Director for The Wilderness Society. “The awe-inspiring vistas and abundant wildlife of Rocky Mountain National Park’s wild backcountry are invaluable to our state’s natural legacy and regional economy – and it’s a legacy worth protecting in perpetuity.”

This bill will protect 249,339 acres of wild lands in the Park as wilderness, as well as provide for the addition of 4,195 acres to the Indian Peaks Wilderness. The bill excludes heavily used frontcountry lands and allows for the maintenance of Trail Ridge Road so that the Park’s extraordinary landscape can continue to inspire all visitors, even those that never travel far from their vehicle.

“We live right next door, so the Park is very important to us,” says Carmen Johnson, who lives next to the Park. “I hope that we can build bipartisan support to pass the bill this year and protect Rocky’s wilderness forever.”

While wilderness legislation has been introduced in Congress for the past seven congresses, progress in passing a bill has been stalled until a recent groundswell of support rose from local citizens, local government, and the National Park Service. At public hearings this past summer in Grand Lake and Estes Park, citizens overwhelmingly championed wilderness protection for the Park. The Town of Grand Lake and the Town of Estes Park, and Grand and Larimer Counties have all passed various resolutions supporting the concept.

“Thirty years after the Park’s original wilderness proposal, the political stars have aligned,” says Jeff Widen, Public Lands Campaign Director for the Colorado Environmental Coalition. “Towns and counties, conservationists and mountain bike advocates have all worked together to craft a package that satisfies everyone, and will keep the Park’s rugged and wild backcountry just the way it is today. Our congressional representatives should work together to pass this bill as soon as possible.”

The management plan for the Park will remain more or less the same, as the Rocky Mountain National Park has been managed as a wilderness study area since it was designated as such by Congress in 1964. However, one recently added provision in the bill, which would carve out a 1/8-mile corridor from the proposed wilderness along the western side of the Park, has caused

some concern. The corridor would be reserved for future consideration of a potential new mountain bike trail. Mountain bikes are not typically allowed in National Park backcountry areas, and conservation groups remain convinced that a new regional bike path would be more appropriately located outside of the Park.

The Colorado Wilderness Network is a coalition of over 360 local governments, businesses, and recreation, faith-based and conservation organizations working to permanently protect the lands described in the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal (CWP) for Colorado's Canyon Country. The efforts of CWN are coordinated by Colorado Environmental Coalition, Colorado Mountain Club, The Sierra Club, Western Colorado Congress, and The Wilderness Society.

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