

## **Wilderness effort meets resistance from Penasco natives**

**By J.R. Logan**

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An effort to expand the Pecos Wilderness met resistance Tuesday (Oct. 6) from a roomful of Penasco residents wary of additional regulations on forested lands they consider their birthright.

“We see this as another layer of bureaucratic stuff to keep us away from land that was intended to sustain our people,” said Vicente Abeyta during a Taos County Commission meeting Tuesday. Abeyta said he was president of a Penasco- area acequia and an heir to two nearby historic land grants.

But members of a coalition pushing for the wilderness expansion say their goal is to protect the same resources — namely water and wildlife — that have been integral to life there for centuries.

Various statewide groups, such as the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and New Mexico Wildlife Federation, are behind an effort to put special protections on 120,000 acres surrounding the existing Pecos Wilderness. Part of this land would become wilderness. Other areas would be protected as “roadless.” Proponents say the designations would essentially set in stone existing restrictions and protect the area for future development.

Similar efforts to gain wilderness designations start with building support in surrounding communities. Any wilderness designation requires an act of Congress, and political gridlock in Washington has made very difficult to pass conservation legislation.

Wilderness advocates have found success in Northern New Mexico and elsewhere by cobbling together a “broad” or “diverse” coalition of supporters that often includes longtime natives. The coalition had originally hoped the Taos County Commission would approve a resolution supporting the designation. Such resolutions and other signs of support have made wilderness designation an easier pitch to Congress.

That’s why the outpouring of opposition from dozens of longtime Penasco natives Tuesday could hinder the designation effort.

Several people came to the meeting with signs proclaiming “Stop wilderness expansion.” Comments from several opponents suggested their concern was based on a long history of exploitation of the community’s land base by government officials and speculators.

Several residents said they were heirs to the Trampas Land Grant and Santa Barbara Land Grant, both of which were awarded to Hispano settlers by the Spanish crown centuries ago.

Tales of chicanery and outright theft of land grant lands are well documented in the area. One speaker called resentment over the loss of land a “festering issue.”

Over time, much of the former grant lands were absorbed into the National Forest, and many people said the proposed wilderness would fall on land grant lands. Some even suggested the land remains property of land grant heirs and is being “managed” by the federal government — an assertion that defies property ownership as it exists on the books but that is deeply held by grant heirs who believe thousands of acres should return to their control.

“We’ve had some real bad experiences with the state and federal government in our area,” said Bonafacio Vasquez, an acequia commissioner in the area. Vasquez said those behind the wilderness effort needed to do a better job of letting the community know what the designation would mean and whether it would affect traditional uses like wood gathering and access to acequia diversions.

Garrett VeneKlasen, executive director of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, said much of the resistance was because of misinformation. “I just don’t think the community is ready to understand what these designations mean,” VeneKlasen said.

He repeatedly said he and other members of the coalition were eager to meet with residents to explain the intent of the expansion and gain their support.

“This is not something that we want to ram down people’s throats,” he said. “We want people to embrace this.”

Members of the coalition are scheduled to meet with Penasco community members in the hopes of better explaining their intentions. The county commission did not vote on whether to support the wilderness designation.

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