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FEATURED

House passes CORE Act again

Legislation would protect 400,000 acres of public lands in Colorado

By Bria Light, Staff Reporter



If passed in the Senate, the CORE Act would add protections to the proposed Liberty Bell Wilderness Area, pictured above, while protecting access for currently allowed recreational uses. The House passed the CORE Act on Friday. (Photo by Bria Light/Telluride Daily Planet)

They say the third time's a charm, and Democratic Senator John Hickenlooper of Colorado, along with his Democratic colleagues Senator Michael Bennet and Representative Joe Neguse, are hoping that's the case with the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy (CORE) Act, which the U.S. House of Representatives passed on Friday.

“The CORE Act represents more than a decade of collaboration by Coloradans across the state to protect and strengthen our outdoor recreation economy and our public lands,” said Hickenlooper in a statement on Friday. “The House's passage of the CORE Act today — for the third time — means we're poised to prove that expression true. We're eager to finish the job in the Senate.”

Though the House passed the bill Friday with bipartisan support, as it did on two previous occasions, this time the story may be poised for a different ending. With the Senate controlled by Democrats, unlike during the last congressional session, Democrats are feeling hopeful that the bill will pass in the Senate, despite the thinnest of margins with a 50-50 partisan split in the Senate and Vice President Kamala Harris' tie-breaking Democratic vote.

The CORE Act, along with the Colorado Wilderness Act, were two parts of a public lands package that also included increased protections for the Grand Canyon. The CORE Act has long enjoyed support from a wide range of Coloradans, as protections designated in the legislation safeguard hunting, fishing, ranching and recreational opportunities, promote rural economies through outdoor tourism, and create the first National Historic Landscape to preserve Camp Hale, the military training grounds of the legendary WWII 10th Mountain Division.

The bill has been a long time in the making, according to those involved in the careful crafting of the legislation to take into account the many interests of Colorado's public land stakeholders.

“San Miguel County stakeholders have diligently negotiated the designations in the CORE Act for over a decade,” San Miguel County Commissioner Hilary Cooper said in a recent news release. “The CORE Act has the support of elected officials, landowners, recreationalists, ranchers, sportsmen and women, veterans, miners, oil and gas producers, and many more stakeholder groups. We worked hard to gather the facts, negotiate and compromise.”

For example, many of the boundaries of proposed protected areas appear as winding, twisting lines on the map — and that’s by design, to allow for the continued use of certain types of recreation like mountain biking and motorized vehicle use. Where those trails already exist, access for those types of recreation will continue, while protecting the lands and ecosystems they belong to with increased protections from future development.

Locally, landscapes that would see increased protections include an area abutting the current Sneffels Wilderness, areas in Ophir’s popular Waterfall and Swamp canyons, and Sheep Mountain, the iconic peak framing the south side of Trout Lake.

“Policies can change dramatically during different administrations,” noted Lexi Tuddenham, executive director of the local conservation nonprofit Sheep Mountain Alliance. “More permanent protection offers stability from the vicissitudes of what a given administration might decide is in their interests politically. It’s really about the long term.”

Protections in both the CORE Act and the Colorado Wilderness Act, she said, combine to work towards the 30 by 30 goal, an international movement and a national goal to protect 30 percent of lands and waters by the year 2030, in part to combat the advances of climate change. The Biden administration has expressed its support for the goal and the legislation. Deb Haaland, Biden’s nominee for Secretary of the Interior, has signaled her support as well.

“Being smart about where we’re developing resources is a key way to fight climate change,” said Tuddenham, noting that Bureau of Land Management public lands are often vulnerable to oil and gas concessions. “The emphasis is on trying to protect the most sensitive landscapes with the highest levels of protection and allow broader types of recreation on lands that are more appropriate for that.”

The public lands package will now head to the Senate, where the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, of which Hickenlooper is a member, will consider it before advancing it to the Senate floor. If passed by the Senate, the approximately 400,000 acres of Colorado public lands designated for protections by the measures will become law once signed by President Biden. Local conservation groups, along with many who rely on Colorado’s \$62 billion dollar outdoor tourism and recreation industry, are hoping that will happen.

“These lands are ever more endangered and ever shrinking,” Tuddenham noted. “It’s protection for future generations.”