



MISSOULIAN EDITORIAL: Cross-state cooperation for Scotchman Peaks Wilderness

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Just a few months ago, Montana marked the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act by celebrating the passage of the first new wilderness designation in the state in more than three decades. The Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act, which received congressional approval last December, added 67,000 acres to the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex.

However, the effort to designate wilderness in Montana didn't end there. Indeed, at least half a dozen wilderness campaigns are currently active in the state. Of these, the Scotchman Peaks wilderness campaign is arguably furthest along and should be the next to receive consideration in Congress.

The Scotchman Peaks Wilderness Area already has the support of key leaders in Montana and Idaho, including Montana's Democratic governor and Idaho's all-Republican Bonner County Commission. In fact, just recently, that commission unanimously approved an official resolution requesting that their state's congressional delegation introduce legislation naming the area a wilderness.

This is a commission, mind you, that is quite vocal about its opposition to wilderness. Scotchman Peaks is "the exception to the rule," as Commission Chairman Cary Kelly explained to the Bonner County Daily Bee.

The reason the commission - and many other residents of the Idaho panhandle and Northwest Montana - agree that the Scotchman Peaks area should be considered wilderness is because it is both unique and uniquely suited for wilderness designation.

The 88,000-acre roadless area that spans the Montana-Idaho border falls within the Idaho Panhandle National Forests and the Kootenai National Forest, both of which recently released management plans containing strong recommendations for designating 60,000 acres of this area as wilderness. The recommendations came as a result of the public forest planning process - as well as 10 years of participation from the Friends of Scotchman Peaks Wilderness group.

Among the region's many special features is the Ross Creek Cedars Scenic Area, which is already under protection because of its rare cedar grove. On the Idaho side, Scotchman Peak is the highest point in Bonner County, at just over 7,000 feet. Lightning Creek is the wettest spot in all of Idaho; it once logged 10 inches of rain in a single day.

On the Montana side, the Kootenai has the distinction of being the largest unprotected wild area. Less than 4 percent of the forest is wilderness, the smallest percentage of any national forest in Montana. The Idaho panhandle, meanwhile, has no designated wilderness at all.

The Friends of Scotchman Peaks Wilderness have been working to change that for about a decade. They are now hopeful that their efforts will bear fruit in the form of legislation within the year.

The group points out that their draft legislation is as straightforward as it gets. It's only a few pages long. It requests no federal funding. It aims only to ensure that all existing uses continue while protecting against the threat of future energy exploration or development.

Indeed, the effort to designate Scotchman Peaks as wilderness has been remarkably free of conflict. The Friends of Scotchman Peaks Wilderness even collaborate with other groups to make sure timber projects move forward.

Last year's passage of new wilderness was certainly a milestone for Montana. However, Montanans must continue working to make sure that new wilderness is recognized wherever it's warranted.

So let's keep up the momentum, and encourage our congressional delegates - U.S. Sens. Steve Daines and Jon Tester and U.S. Rep. Ryan Zinke - to work with Idaho's congressional delegates to introduce legislation designating the Scotchman Peaks Wilderness.