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How do we preserve our natural resources?

By Jerry G. Schickedanz and Gerald W. Thomas For the Sun-News
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The proposed Wilderness designation of hundreds of thousands of acres of land in Doña Ana County has become very controversial between sportsmen, builders, ranchers, wilderness advocates and others. Why? The controversy comes down to two words: access and management. Is there a solution? Absolutely. We believe the solution is found in the concept of Rangeland Preservation Area (RPA).

It is an idea that was conceived here in Doña Ana County. It has the potential to become a landmark idea, and, if it is successfully adopted by the U.S. Congress, it has real implications for the entire West. What is it?

An honest evaluation reveals that the vast majority of the land in Doña Ana County does not meet the requirements for federal Wilderness designation. Additionally, many residents have serious concerns about the loss of access and restrictive management practices imposed on federal Wilderness areas.

However, there is broad agreement throughout the community that these lands are worthy of special recognition, protection and management. If successfully adopted by the U.S. Congress, this approach has implications for the entire West. The RPA has the potential to become the method for resolving the numerous

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controversies and wide resistance surrounding the proposals for additional federal Wilderness designations.

We are all familiar with the classifications for National Forests, National Parks, National Monuments, National Grasslands, and National Wildlife Refuges. There are also added designations that

include Wilderness, National Recreation Areas (NRA), National Conservation Areas (NCA), Wilderness Study Areas (WSA), or areas of simple Withdrawal. The added designations are intended to protect some special feature of the land or adjust the management of that feature to fit the particular and unique nature of the land. Each of these designations can only occur as a result of an act of Congress.

The Rangeland Preservation Area is a proposed federal land designation that

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would expand and enhance these land designations available for Congress to apply to lands for particular protective measures. When the existing land designations are studied, every one of them centers on the reduction or complete elimination of the presence of man. They afford "protections" against man, accompanied by promises of future enjoyment by man. The idea of Rangeland Preservation Areas counters that philosophy and approach, and offers a new revelation in recognizing the historical fabric of human involvement with the land and the expectation of continued stewardship with the promise of permanent open space protection . . . forever.

The idea also calls for the inclusion of protective measures derived from local characteristics and conditions. Every area is not the same; therefore, every area has the need to be protected and managed on the basis of local influences and character. Doña Ana County residents have the right to have a say in protective measures for federal lands.

Nine standards of expectation were defined during the Doña Ana County Regional Planning process in which local citizens participated. These standards were used as the basis for developing this idea of Rangeland Preservation Areas. These expectations include:

1. retention of open space (permanently),
2. provisions for the allowance of growth,
3. unrestricted allowance of law enforcement and Homeland Security actions,
4. prevention of unlawful off-highway activity,
5. continued access for all citizens to federal lands,
6. perpetuation of ranching activities,
7. access to flood control and water capture projects,
8. enhancement of wildlife and rangeland health, and;
9. the adherence to the true fidelity of wilderness concepts and laws.

The concept, Rangeland Preservation Area, is truly an outgrowth of the fidelity of wilderness standards of expectation. If there are lands worthy of special protection, we should not create a flawed proxy for the wilderness standard. Rather, a Rangeland Preservation Area can be created that maintains the character and history the area represents, and man is an important part of that history. At the same time, the lands can be permanently protected.

This concept is the cornerstone for the legislative proposal, "The Doña Ana County Planned Growth, Open Space and Rangeland Preservation Act of 2008," developed by People for Preserving Our Western Heritage.

Rangeland Preservation Areas are intended to provide a way to protect the land from whatever the identified concerns are, and to be able to provide access to the land for all segments of the public who want to enjoy the lands responsibly. It will provide protection from building and development, mineral exploration, new roads and sale or trade. It will provide for historical uses such as livestock ranching, outdoor recreation, lawful off highway vehicle use, mountain biking and other uses that require access to the land. The end result of permanent land protection is provided. The difference between Rangeland Preservation Areas and federal Wilderness designations is that local control and adjustments can be made so that those who have duties, responsibilities, vested private and public access or investments in the areas of consideration are not destroyed. Periodic review of the management practices is provided in this legislation. We owe it to future generations to properly preserve and manage these irreplaceable natural resources.

Our country needs this innovative approach to the management of our Western lands.

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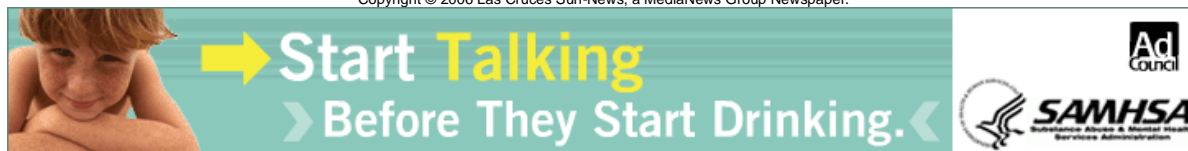
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